



# Decolonizing The Concept Of Tribe In India- Bringing New Understanding

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## Abstract-

Tribe as a term in the political discourse of present India is laced with the colonial ideology and discourse which the post- independence Indian state has carried on. This concept was coined by the British mind of the 19th century with their primordial sense of anthropology and sociology but above all their approach was administrative in using this term. There is need to decolonize the understanding of the political concepts and pre-give social identities if we want to radical transform the political discourse in India.

## Introduction-

Tribe as a term in the political discourse of present India is laced with the colonial ideology and discourse which the post- independence Indian state has carried on. This concept was coined by the British mind of the 19th century with their primordial sense of anthropology and sociology but above all their approach was administrative in using this term. In the twentieth century the colonial state started the task of enumerating and categorizing its citizens into self-defined categories like Tribe, Caste and Backward Classes. This task of census indirectly led to categorization of communities into categories like Scheduled Caste, Backwards Caste and Scheduled tribe. This categorization had created a political discourses which has dominated politics of India since independence. These categories are now taken as given rather as pre-political which should be assumed as fundamental units of politics of India. Therefore it is very important to deconstruct these concepts like Tribe from their historical conception during the colonial rule.

## Definition of Tribe in India-

Imperial Gazetteer of India defines - *a tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name , speaking a common dialect occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and it not usually endogamous , though originally it might have been so.*<sup>iii</sup>

According to Encyclopedia Britannica the word **Tribal** has etymologically derived from a Latin word **tribus** which means **to be three** the world originally referred to differentiate the tree basic territorial groups which united to make Rome. This word had no negative connotation then as compared to today where this term has been used to identify certain groups with attached derogatory meanings arises on the appropriateness of this term to be used to for communities living in the lap of nature or in the forests.<sup>ii</sup>

Scholar S.C. Dube points out that the Indian state has no clear and rational indicators for identification of tribalism prevailing in a particular community. Tribe has been used at one time to denote a bewildering variety of social categories that were neither analogous nor comparable.<sup>iii</sup>

**The Great Congress of Tribal Situation (1969) Shimla Seminar** organized by the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies Shimla has also failed in arriving at a conceptually clear definition being Tribe.

Anthropologist K.S.Singh in his seminal work **The Scheduled Tribes: People of India** writes any discussion of tribes in India has to proceed from the assumption that a tribe is an administrative and political concept in India.<sup>iv</sup>

### Changing Definitions of the Word Tribe-

The census reports of India have not been uniform over the period of time in terms of defining the concept of tribe. In 1891 they were classified as **Forest Tribes** which was directly related to their occupation background. In 1901 Census defined them as **Animists** which was the predominant connotation of their faith and in 1911 it was changed to **Tribal Animists**. In 1931 they were defined as the Primitive Tribes and in 1935 reports called the Backward Tribe. While 1941 mentioned the only word Tribes, after independence in 1948 they were called **Adivasi**. In 1950 for the implementation of special provisions mentioned under the constitution they were categorized as the **Schedule Tribe**.<sup>v</sup>

The Commissioner of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in 1952 defined the term tribe as follow - **Tribals are people who live in the forests and jungles away from the civilized world. They belong to Negrito, Australoid, or Mongoloid stocks. They speak the tribal language and profess the primitive religion know as Animism. They follow primitive occupations like hunting and gathering. They are largely carnivorous and meat eaters. They live either naked or semi naked using tree barks or leaves. They love to drink and dance and spend their life with nomadic habits.**<sup>vi</sup> This definition clearly points out that the Indian state accepts tribes as communities living outside the boundaries of the civilized world and unable to co-exist with the civilized world. This logically culminates that tribal identity cannot be sustained in a civilized world. They are incapable of standing in the modern world therefore they always need the big brother state. Tribal has been racially profiled which clearly bears the mark of the colonial racial biases otherwise where would tribes like Pashtuns and Khasa of the hill ( Kashmiri, Himachali Gaddis, Pangwal, unrecognized like Kulvi, Sirmouri or upper Shimla or Uttarakhandi of Garhwal would have been placed due to their European looks. Literature produced by the outsiders as Anthropologists, sociologists and historians has often beaten the same old drums of the colonial scholars who came with their own perspectives and agendas, which obviously has been very derogatory to these communities. There is the need to de-tribalizing and rewrite the history of tribes in India in order decolonized their discourse which will empower their own perspective regarding their identity.<sup>vii</sup>

### Static and Historically frozen concept of Tribe-

There is also no criteria or process of judging how much these tribal communities have been mainstreamed due to the reservations in employment and by the forces of modernization. Because the very term Tribe or Schedule Tribe indicates a static identity which has been frozen over the years in this constitutional categorization and it is assumed that real communities categorized as tribes as having witnessed no change in their socio-economic and cultural consciousness. What is the objective criteria on which transformation in the life of tribal communities will be measured and at which level they will be declared Non-tribal? Many studies have shown that there is little scientific basis on which the present categorization of Schedule Tribe may be defended. Because the exclusion or inclusion of a particular group reflects political mobilization rather than a neutral application of the criteria.<sup>viii</sup>

M.C. Behera points at the inadequacy of the term tribe to identify a group or community of people as tribal. He asserts that this term Tribe is time-neutral and cannot accommodate the upwards mobility of the so-called tribal groups which makes them akin to modern society. Behera proposes the term community instead sticking with the concept of tribe.<sup>ix</sup>

## Veerier Elwin's impact on the Tribal Policy of Indian State-

Veerier Elwin was born in the family of Colonel Bishop and he was raised in an evangelical family. He came to India as a priest and joined **Christo Seva Sangh** (CSS) at Poona. This organization was created to indianise the Christian faith by living the vegetarian life and living a simple life. They were even ready to add Indian motifs to their liturgy. Elwin saw Gandhi as the modern interpreter of the message of Christ and became his follower. His good relations with Nehru helped him in becoming the sole spokesperson and expert of independent India's tribal policy. After Independence in the name of protecting unique tribal culture, the Nehru government introduced the **Inner Line Permit (ILP)** system in North - East India. How the preservationist and conservationist approach of Veerie Elwin could not stop rapid growth of Christianity among the hitherto animist tribes of North- East? The struggle for freedom against British rule in the North - East was equally against the colonial policies and also against the imposition of a foreign faith. The life struggles of freedom fighters like U Kiang Nangbah and Togan Nengminija Sangma from Meghalaya, Lalnu Ropuiliani and Pasaltha Khungchera from Lushai hills (Mizoram), Rani Gaidinliu and Haipou Jadonang from Nagaland are proof of this resistance.<sup>x</sup>

## Christian missionaries and Changing Tribal identity-

Christian proselytization in the Naga Hills grew with the colonial rule of the British. The area's first **Captain Johnstone** writes, 'I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion, that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilization, that with it they would want a religion, and that we might just as well give them our own, and make them in that way a source of strength, by this mutually attaching them to us.... It cannot be doubted, that a large population of Christian hill men between Assam and Burmah, would be a valuable prop to the State.'<sup>xi</sup>

Captain Johnstone was exhorting the Church of England but it was American Baptists who were allowed to start their mission in the hills. In 1872 Rev. **E.V. Clark** reached the hills and started preaching in the Ao language. After the initial success of Clark's mission, the **Impur Mission** represented a more rationalized effort to convert Nagas to Christianity. **C. D. King** established the Kohima mission in 1878 at the heart of Angami territory. They translated the message of the Bible into different tribal dialects and tried to assimilate Christian theology into the preexisting tribal theology wherever it was possible. Domination of the British which broke their traditional autonomous lifestyles and favors of the colonial state was other factors which facilitated their conversions. In the later stages education and missionary schools became the main tools in the process of conversions. Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur have shown the most mass conversions to Christianity in all of Asia while only second to the Philippines. Richard Eaton points out that by the 1990 approximately 90 % of the Naga population became Christian within the span of a century. Major conversion of Nagas took a big thrust after the end of British Colonial rule and expulsion of foreign missionaries by the government of India.<sup>xii</sup>

This process of transformation of animistic and self-sufficient Tibeto-Burmese tribes with the touch of proselytization transformed them into a new nationality called the Nagas which was a term given by the outsiders which they started to assign to themselves. This touch of Baptist Christianity made them conscious of their difference with their own heathen remaining Nagas movement and Hindus of the plains. This identity became very crucial for their resistance against the political assimilation efforts by the India state. The Baptized Naga political leadership since 1947 gave further push to conversion to create an unified national identity of Nagas as Christian. The war cry of Naga armed struggle and secessionism became **Nagaland for Christ** which is an assertion of their new found national identity.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Manipur Clashes- Contestation for Tribal Status

Recent clashes in May-June 2023 sparked in Manipur between Valleys based Meitei who are Hindus and Kuki who are predominantly Christian convert. Kuki and Meitei both were historically living in Indo-Burman territory. The Meitei kingdom of the Imphal valley in 1901 devised a permit or passport system to control the entry of foreigners (which included Indians as well as non-Manipuri). Meitei claim they were left out from the STs List and now they are demanding inclusion into the scheduled tribal list. They are debarred from purchasing land in the 90 % of the total territory of Manipur in the name of protecting the rights of tribals. While Kuki and other tribes are purchasing land in the valley. Clashes broke out when the Tribal Students Union organized the protest march against the Manipur High Court's order to the state government to submit a recommendation to the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs on the question of including Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list. <sup>xiv</sup>As K.S.Singh has asserted that the concept of **tribe** is an administrative and political concept in India. Meiteis have realized this political and administrative nature of being a tribe and they are over the years pushing in this direction. This has made already declared tribes, especially Kuki, more insecure of facing competition in jobs from Meiteis and beside that their exclusive rights to land will be opened up for Meiteis. Kuki are claiming that they are still economically backward as compared to Meitei's and they have faced historically discrimination from the dominant Meitei community. Now Kuki community on the basis of their distinct identity are demanding the creation of separate state or territorial council for them within the territory of Manipur. In case of Kuki their Christianized tribal identity have become a political ideology for legitimizing the demand for separate political identity from the Hindu Meiteis.

### Why the concept of Schedule Tribe does cannot be time-neutral?

There should be an analysis of the past more than seven decades of tribal policy and laws which protected them to see what impact they have on the ground in Manipur. How much tribals are lagging behind the mainstream and how much they have assimilated the norms of modernity? Question arises whether the Kuki tribal community is the same gullible tribe which used to inhabit these lands seven decades ago? What is the motive of the Constitutional categorization of people into Tribes is it to preserve them forever into this identity or to make way for their gradual assimilation into the mainstream? Can there be any community which can remain static in terms of their norms, lifestyles and economic circumstance over the years? Therefore there is the need to re-evaluate the socio-economic and political conditions of the communities who have been designated as tribes over the years. There will be tribes like Meena of Rajasthan, Lahaula & Kinnaur tribes of Himachal who have much richer and empowered lifestyles as compared to the non-tribals of their society.<sup>xv</sup> Over the years many tribes have made rapid advancement into modernity and mainstream while there are others who are still living in primitive ways of life. It is important that the state treats these two categories of tribal community differently and nature of their protection and rights will vary according to their advancement into the scale of modernity.

### Tribal Identity and Suppression of Women rights-

In Tribal context customary property rights has become an excuse to establish rule by patriarchy. In the context of Nagaland customary rights are being implemented by the village councils which are made up of the male members of the family. Although such provisions were made to protect the tribal community rights, over the years these have treated tribal women as the second class citizens in terms of legal equality and participation in the political institutions at the local level. This is very blunt in Nagaland which has failed in conducting elections to local bodies because their tribal councils are not ready to fulfil the condition of 33 per reservation to the women in the local self - governance institutions. The **Central Naga Tribal Council** (is the body representing all the 16 tribes of Nagaland) has been opposing since 2017 the implementation of the **Panchayati Raj Institutions** which will give women 33 percent reservations for women in the local bodies. These protestors believed that reservation for women is against their customary law and violates special rights guaranteed under Article 371(A) of the Constitution.<sup>xvi</sup>



***Inheritance laws and Tribal Women-***

Rattan Manjari of Kinnaur has been fighting an everlasting battle with the battle for the inheritance rights of the tribal women in Kinnaur district. Her long struggle is a voice for the tribal women of Lahaul, Spiti, Kinnaur, Bharmour and Pangi valley of Himachal Pradesh.<sup>xvii</sup> On the name of customary laws women have been denied their just rights under the constitution of India. Kinnaur and Lahaul have one of the highest per capita income in the entire Himachal and even in comparison to the National level too. They have a proper understanding of modernity and are availing all the facilities of modern life. Still the old customary laws are being justified in the name of tribal identity and culture.

***Situation of the Tribal Women of North-East-***

Tribes of North East India come under the sixth schedule of the constitution which provides them liberty of having their own customary inheritance law. Impact of modernization has transformed the lives of Angami and other Nagaland tribes, Garo tribes of Meghalaya, Dimasas of Assam and the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh. Commercialization of crops has forced the tribal society to go for individualized legal property rights and usually the male members of the family are becoming land owners. Because the male members are doing entrepreneurial work and investment in farms. Banks are usually issuing loans for this purpose and males by default are taking these loans by becoming the owner of the land. Such is changing pattern of the nature of land ownership in the traditionally matrilineal societies like Garo too.<sup>xviii</sup> Although in Garos women still inherit property but usually the management of properties is given to male. The Angami tribal women cannot inherit her family's traditional property but her parents can give them their own purchased property. This is justified on the concept of **gifts** that girls receive in terms of education. The Dimasa has more egalitarian inheritance law as compared to other tribes of North-East India. But this fact cannot be denied that the identity of tribes like all identities hide certain fault lines and they are now becoming wider.

***Can Tribal Identity and Christianity go together-?***

Famous Lutheran Adivasi bishop Nirmal Minz has exhorted the tribals give up tribal status for conversation into Christianity which is the mark of progress and modernity. Bishop Nirmal Minz writes, "One should be proud to being a Christian than being a tribe /tribal. Because a Christians from is empowered to be the light of the nation but to become a tribal is a burden of the nation and remain "defeated people' in India."<sup>xix</sup> His is very clear to be converted to Christianity means to reborn with new faith of light and progress. Tribal is an identity of servitude and being backward which antithetical to the redeeming ethos of Christianity. **Richard M Eaton** has shown in his work on comparative history of world religions that conversion is not complete until the newly converted do not completely shun their past identity. Being a Christian is progressive while their pre-Christian identity is rooted in the irrational past.

***Conclusion-***

There is need to decolonize the understanding of the political concepts and pre-give social identities if we want to radical transform the political discourse in India. Deconstruction of the fundamental pre-given political units like caste, tribe, religion and gender is very crucial to work for the goal of political emancipation of individuals and communities. Purpose of this article is to open up new angles to see the existing realities of politics.

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