

Unit 18

Tribe and Caste

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- The nature of tribal transformation to castes;
- The processes of sanskritisation and hinduisation vis-à-vis tribes;
- Language as a unique factor of tribal identity;
- Bases of misconstruction of tribal identity;
- Community life of tribe.

18.1 Introduction

In the post-independence period not only does one find greater concern but also more systematic efforts towards distinguishing tribe from caste. And yet, till today scholars have not been able to arrive at a systematically worked out criterion. In general they have tried to distinguish one from the other on the basis of a number of criteria. It has generally been assumed that the two represent two different forms of social organizations. Castes have been treated as one regulated by the hereditary division of labour, hierarchy, principle of purity and pollution, civic and religious disabilities, etc. Tribes on the other hand have been seen as one characterized by the absence of features attributed to the caste. The two types of social organizations are also considered as governed by the different set of principles.

It is said that bonds of kinship govern the tribal society. Each individual is hence considered to be equal to 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 is an integral feature of caste society. It is also said that tribes do not differentiate as sharply as caste groups do, the differences between the utilitarian and non-utilitarian function of the religion. Caste groups tend to maintain different forms, practices and behaviour pattern for each of these two aspects of the religion. Tribes in contrast maintain similar forms, practices and behaviour pattern for both function of the religion. Tribes and castes are also shown to be different in respect of the psychological disposition of its members. Tribes are said to take direct, unalloyed satisfaction in pleasures of the senses whether in food, drink, sex, dance or song. As against this caste people maintain 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 and some others, certain images and propositions have been developed with respect to the concept of tribe in India. These include such facets as absence of exploiting classes and organized state structures; multi-functionality of kinship bonds; all pervasive religion; segmentary character of socio-economic unit; frequent cooperation for common goals; shallow history; distinct taboos, customs and moral codes; youth dormitory; low level of technology; common name, territory, descent, language, culture etc. (Pathy, 1992: 50).

Paradoxically however these sets of denominators in terms of which tribes are differentiated from the non-tribes, that is, castes are not subscribed to by a large number of groups identified as tribes in India. And even groups, that do subscribe these attributes, hardly stand in the same or similar relation to each other, in respect of these attributes. At one end there are groups that subscribe to these features in *toto* and the other end are those that hardly show these attributes. The large majority of them however stand somewhere in between subscribing to the attributes referred above to a greater or lesser degree. Assumptions associated with the tribes more often than not have therefore been misleading and fallacious to a considerable extent. Notwithstanding such differences among groups in relation to subscription of such attributes they have however all been identified as tribes. The only thing they however seem to share in common is, as Beteille puts it, that they all stand more or less outside of Hindu civilization. And since the identification of tribes is also linked with the administration of political and administrative considerations, little effort has been made to critically examine it. Rather they have been uncritically accepted among the social scientists.

18.2 Transformation to castes

In the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrator-scholars to mark off tribe from caste also gave rise to a particular conception of a tribe. That is, tribes were one which lived in isolation from the rest of the population and therefore without any interaction or interconnection with them. In contrast the main concern in the post-colonial ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or the civilization. The relation has, of course, been differently conceptualized. Sinha (1958) views tribes 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) sees tribes more as a matter of remaining outside of state and civilization in contexts where tribe and civilization co-exist, as in India and the Islamic world. Thus, 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 been most often the case, they have not been treated as falling outside the civilization influence. Hence, tribes have been viewed as being in constant interaction with the civilization. Consequently the tribal society has not been seen as static but in a process of change.

One of the dominant modes in which the transformation of the tribal society has been conceived is in terms of tribe moving in the direction of becoming a part of civilization by getting absorbed into the society that represents civilization. Both historians and anthropologists have made such observation in the context of the past. Kosambi (1975) has referred to tribal elements being fused into the general society. Similarly, N.K. Bose (1941) makes reference of tribes being absorbed into the Hindu society. Such a claim has not gone abetted. A large number of anthropological works of the post-independence era still point to phenomena such as tribes being absorbed or assimilated into Hindu society or tribes becoming caste. Tribes are said to have accepted the

ethos of caste structure and absorbed within it. Hence they are treated as hardly differentiable from those of neighbouring Hindu peasantry. Some of the well-known tribes in this category are said to be Bhils, Bhumijis, Majhi, Khasa and Raj-Gond. In fact, much of the social anthropological discourse on tribes has been primarily couched in terms of tribes being transformed to caste. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the classification of tribes provided by the eminent anthropologists. Different scholars have of course made the classification differently; but all invariably refer to a stage of incorporation into the Hindu society. Some of the classifications in vogue are referred below.

Roy Burman (1972) in his earlier work classified tribes as (1) those incorporated in the Hindu society, (2) those positively oriented to Hindu society, (3) those negatively oriented and (4) those indifferent to the Hindu society. Vidyarthi (1977) talked of tribes as (1) those living in forest, (2) those in rural areas, (3) semi-acculturated, (4) acculturated and (5) assimilated. Elwin (1944) categorized tribes into four categories. These were (1) purest of the pure tribal groups, (2) those in contact with the plains and therefore changing but still retaining the tribal mode of living, (3) those forming the lower rung of the Hindu society, (4) those adopted to full Hindu faith and living in modern style. The criteria of classification used by Vidyarthi suffer from the lack of logical consistency. Elwin even 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 having to suffer the despair and degradation of the third. Dube too classifies tribes along almost the same lines as those of Elwin. There are also many others including Bose, Fuchs etc. who have not made specific classifications but do make mention of tribes occupying either the lower or the higher rung by getting absorbed into the Hindu society.

There are of course scholars who caution us from such conception of transformation of the tribes. Roy-Burman (1983,1994) in his later writings points out that if the transformation of tribe into peasant is not to be taken for granted, the transformation of tribe into caste in the Indian context can also hardly be taken for granted. This he does by providing a critique of the Bose and Srinivas models. He points to lack of protection from caste for the Hinduised tribes, the rationale for transformation of tribe into caste in Bose's model and empirical reality of contra- Sanskritic movements against Srinivas' model. Pathy (1992:50-51) questions the dominant trend of understanding tribal transformation into caste on account of lack of historical and contextual evidence. Yet he endorses quite approvingly the observation of Kosambi when he says that the entire course of Indian history shows that tribal elements are being fused into general society.

18.01 Action and Reflection

Is there process of tribal transformation into caste? Give answer to your statement.

The transformation of the tribes into castes is conceived to occur through certain methods that have again been diversely conceptualized. Kosambi (1975) considers adoption of technology of the Hindu society by the tribes to be the major method of getting integrated into the Hindu society. Bose (1941) talks of the Hindu method of absorption that takes place under the system of the organization of the production. He says that tribes are drawn into the system because they find protection within the system, the system being non-competitive. Sanskritisation is also seen as a kind of method through which tribes are absorbed into the Hindu society. The other significant method of the tribal absorption into the Hindu society is what Sinha (1962, 1987) calls as 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 were examined in the broader context of the formation of the principality. He further writes that the formation of the state provided the decisive socio-political framework for the transformation of the tribal system into the regional caste system.

18.3 Sanskritization

As noted earlier it has generally been held that tribes in contact with the non-tribes have been undergoing change and change has been in the direction of absorption in the Hindu society through complexity of social processes. Scholars have conceptualized the processes at work diversely. This is evident from the range of terms that have been used to capture the processes, the most common being the terms of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation. At times anthropologists have also made use of such specific terms as Kshatriyisation and Rajputisation in place of Sanskritisation. These terms describe different social processes at work though in actual empirical reality these processes coincide and overlap. Notwithstanding this there has been tendency among the social scientists to use them interchangeably or synonymously. More often than not the difficulties arising from the use of such terms are overcome by use of such generic terms as acculturation, assimilation, absorption etc. However the main processes through which transformation of tribe into caste is understood are Hinduisation and Sanskritisation.

The question is whether such processes as Hinduisation, Sanskritisation etc. that occur in the tribal society lead to the dislocation of tribal society and pave the way for its absorption in the Hindu society? Does tribe by virtue of getting acculturated cease to be tribe and becomes caste? In fact, almost all 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 no longer true of India after independence.

Since acculturation of tribes to Hindu society or transformation of tribes to caste is attributed to the process of Sanskritisation/ Hinduisation, it is imperative at the very outset to examine the appropriateness of these terms and concepts especially of Sanskritisation. Sanskritisation is seen as a process whereby the communities lower down the rung emulate the life-style of the dominant caste of the region. By this process of emulation, the castes lower down the rung would move up in the ladder of the caste hierarchy. At times, more specific terms such as Kshatriyisation or Rajputisation have been used to describe such a process. Now this process was used to understand the dynamics of social change within caste society. Sociologists and social anthropologists have however also extended this term and concept to describe certain process of change that has been going on the tribal society. Is this extension valid to describe transformations being witnessed in the tribal society? In my view the extension, in the sense in which it is used, is far from appropriate in the context of tribal society. It is inappropriate because it assumes that tribes are first of all part of Hindu society and second that they are part of the caste society. Tribes have however been conceived as tribes precisely because they are outside the Hindu as well as the caste society. That is, tribe is a society that remains outside the caste-Hindu society. Can there be a process of Sanskritization as it has been conceived without tribe's first becoming part of the caste Hindu society? The process demands that tribes first must enter the Hindu society.

18.02 Action and Reflection

Does Sanskritisation exist among Tribals? Discuss.

The question that arises is whether Hinduisation is the same as Sanskritisation. The two are, of course, interrelated but it may be more appropriate to describe the processes involved in the context of tribes as Hinduisation rather than Sanskritisation. This is so because climbing up the hierarchy is not the overriding concern among the tribes. Of course it is not possible to conceive of Hindu faith and practices outside that of caste organization. Hinduisation thus invariably entails assuming some caste status. But the caste status that is accorded to the tribes is said to be one of 'low caste status'. If this is the case, where is the process of social mobility in the case of the tribes? What is it that tribes gain through this process? Neither have they made claim for higher status (Hardiman, 1987: 158-159). Rather it is outsiders who impose such a status on the tribes. In fact, even after Hinduisation tribes by and large remain outside the hierarchical structure of the Hindu society. If at all there have been such claims, these have been made, as we shall see only after they have been drawn into the larger social structure of the neighbouring Hindu and linguistic community.

The problem with the concept of Sanskritisation in the case of the tribes does not end there. In fact, there is also a problem of the reference group. It is far from clear from the literature as to which of the caste groups, tribes (barring those belonging to royal or chiefly lineage) emulated in their respective region. The royal/chiefly lineage has invariably emulated the Rajputs and has entered into matrimonial alliance with them. Thus whereas the upper strata of the tribal society got integrated into Hindu caste society, the subjects continued to live outside Hindu society though there may have been a process of Hinduisation among them. Climbing up the ladder of hierarchy had been not their main concern. Given this, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of Hinduisation than of Sanskritisation in the context of tribes in India. Further, if at all tribes consider some castes as superior, it is not because of their caste status but because they happen to be jagirdars, thicadars, lambadars, etc.

The question that may be asked then is why tribes Hinduism 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 it is no longer the case today. Today, the process of acculturation into ideas, values and practices of the dominant community is more of being like the dominant community than one of being part of that society by assuming some caste status.

18.4 Hinduisation

It is thus apparent that tribes have been described as caste more for the aspect of Hinduisation than sanskritisation. Indeed this seems to be the most often than not the basis for describing tribes as caste in the social anthropological literature. And yet can they be described as castes just because they have become hinduised? Is the process of Hinduisation sufficient enough for designating a group as caste? Is it not possible for a tribe to be handiest and yet remain outside the caste system viz., to be governed by the social organizational principles of a tribe rather than of caste? Aspects such as these have either not been given sufficient attention to or have been overlooked in studies where tribes have been modeled on the caste or the civilization framework. If Hindu society cannot be understood outside caste society, then transformation of the tribe into caste or Hindu society as the scholars have been arguing is problematic. Indeed the whole argument of the transformation of tribes into caste seems to be misplaced and even erroneous.

Theoretically it is possible to become Hindu in the sense of embracing a form of Hindu faith and practices without becoming part of the Hindu society in the sense of Hindu social organization viz. caste. If on the other hand Hindu

society and caste organization are inseparable, then Hinduisation alone cannot account for the transformation of the tribe into caste. In fact there are other aspects, to which sociologists and social anthropologists need to give some attention to. These are aspects such as whether tribes actually become part of the structure of caste society after they have taken to the process of Hinduisation/ Sanskritisation? What caste name do they bear and what definite position they occupy in the caste hierarchy? It is also not clear whether groups involved in the process occupy the same position or there is hierarchical arrangement among them as has been the case with the untouchables. Also what caste roles do they assume, say in villages where both tribe and castes inhabit, as in most villages of Chotanagpur where caste groups like Banias, Brahmin, Rajputs and others live in the same village as the tribals? In fact, the nature and kind of interaction tribes enter into with the caste members of the society is governed more by market and economic interdependence than that of purity-pollution. Further their life in the village continues to be grounded on the principle of kinship bonds and absence of hierarchical ordering. In short, tribes do not enter into any kind of social, cultural and ritual dependence with the caste structure of the society even after acculturation into the Hindu belief system and practices. It is doubtful then if it is appropriate to study people described as tribes from the perspective of the caste structure? This is precisely however what the anthropologists have done. They have tried to find caste where it does not exist.

Box 18.1: Paradox of Hinduisation of Tribes

Tribes have not moved into processes like Hinduisation or Sanskritisation as a whole group. The general pattern among them is that only a section of them move to a new pattern of life provided either by Christianity or Hinduism or Islam etc. If this is the case more often than not, can we describe some people of the same group as caste and others as tribe? Can one and the same group become caste and tribes at the same time? The empirical reality of a village where tribes form a minority and are absorbed into the Hindu society is extended to villages and regions where they may not be minority and where even if there is process of Hinduisation, they may not abandon their old affinities and identity. Where, however, tribes have taken to Hinduisation as a whole, they have to a great extent molded themselves along caste lines. They have even identified themselves as caste and others too have addressed them as castes rather than as tribes. The Koch-Rajbongshis of Assam and West Bengal referred to above may be taken as a case in point. But the phenomenon of the group as a whole moving to a different value system is rather rare. But even where such 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 strata. Neither 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 limit the discussion only to the relationship between tribes and the caste society. There is also a need to look into how tribes themselves perceived, identified and related themselves with the caste society. How did tribes perceive themselves after they have taken to certain aspects of Hindu beliefs and practices? Did they perceive and identify themselves as tribes or as castes? The important ways through which tribes took recourse to the process of Hinduisation or Sanskritisation are what anthropologists have described as the 'religious / cultural movement'. The movement has been more popularly described as the Bhagat movement among the tribes. In fact despite the process of Hinduisation/ Sanskritisation, tribes do not set aside a section of them as caste and another as tribe. They are not treated as those having moved away from the status of the tribes. Rather tribes are categorized into different groups depending on the type of religious values they have taken recourse to mould their life. They are therefore differently described such as Christians, Bhagats, Sarnas, etc.

It is interesting to note that tribes even when they have been hinduized do not describe themselves as Hindus but as Bhagats. It is outsiders, census officials and anthropologists who have tended 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 pertaining to autonomy, land, forest 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 as against those of the caste categories. In short, the process of Hinduisation is necessary but not sufficient for tribes to be integrated into the structure of the Hindu society viz. the caste society. To be integrated, tribes must be drawn to the social organization of the caste system, that is, by and large, not an empirical reality.

18.5 Language

The discussion above points to the fact that it is not possible to become a caste without being first integrated into the structure of Hindu society. Where such integration did occur, a very important process has been the acculturation of the tribes into the language of the regional community. It is significant to note that castes as a social organization are operative only within a linguistic community. Hence it is possible for tribe to become 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 of acculturation that is so central to integration in the regional community and therefore caste society has unfortunately been glossed over by the 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. Correspondingly tribes were not only differentiated in opposition to castes but also in opposition to the dominant community of the region. The dominant community was invariably a linguistic community. Besides representing different language it also represented different religion, customs, social organization and the way of life.

This raises an interesting question viz. whether tribes after they have become handiest and even 'caste-like' are to be treated either as castes or as tribes if they continue to maintain their language? After all, as noted earlier, tribes have also been conceived in opposition to language or the linguistic community. Can they be both tribes and castes at the same time? This seems far from tenable, as the two not only constitute a different linguistic community but also two contrasting types of social organizations. Are then tribes to be treated as castes just because there has been process of Hinduisation among them? Do tribes by Hinduising and Sanskritising become castes while retaining on the other hand their language, culture, custom, social practices and so on? What is important to note is the influence of the Hinduism or the Hindus on tribes. This however does not make them the Hindus. To be Hindus they need to be drawn into the structure of the Hindu society, which is possible only by getting drawn into the structure of the regional linguistic community. Tribes are differentiated from non-tribes not on the basis of religion alone. That is what the colonial ethnographers did.

Anthropologists have differentiated tribes from others however on more than one criterion. Of these the most important have been language and the social organization of the caste. Tribes have been thus treated as tribes precisely because they have been outside the dominant regional community and thereby outside the complex of civilization. However even with changes at the level of culture including religion and language one is still not sure if tribes could

be said to have become castes. Much, of course, was dependent on the nature of their linkage with the social structure of the regional linguistic and Hindu society. Indeed what seem to me to be the most crucial feature for integration of tribes into the structure of the regional community are not only religion and language but also the organizational structure of the regional community.

Of the aspects of acculturation, acculturation into language is to my mind more important than of religion though the latter is not altogether unimportant. Unfortunately sociologists and anthropologists have never given language the place it deserves in understanding the transformation of tribes into caste. And yet without going into these questions anthropologists have jumped to the conclusion that tribes are becoming caste or getting integrated into the Hindu society.

It is also to be noted that being drawn into a larger society does not mean that tribes cease to interact as a society. Do they then by virtue of cultural change within society cease to be society? Does Bengali society cease to be a society in the wake of the process of westernization and modernization within it? The paradox is that nobody ever denies the existence and identity of the Bengali society but if the same process occurs in tribal society, the general trend is to negate its existence. That tribes exist as a society as much as the other societies exist is unfortunately denied to tribal society when it undergoes change in the context of its encounter with the larger society. Anthropologists have been swift to incorporate them into the larger society at the slightest sign of change in them. In their zeal to emphasize change or the acculturation process, the aspect of continuity about which anthropologists so fondly talk about in the context of the larger Indian reality has been completely overlooked in the context of tribal social reality.

What the discussion points to, is that the conclusions such as ones reached by sociologists/ social anthropologists are based on inadequacy of ethnography, concept and even logic. There is hardly any inquiry into the ways in which the Hinduised tribes are linked with the castes and the ways in which they relate with their original group. Also no effort whatsoever has been made to ascertain if the acculturated tribes were regulated by the principle of caste organization or of the organization of tribe? Issues such as these that are central to the argument in support of transformation of tribe into caste has unfortunately not been adequately looked into and examined. Not only that but even the concepts such as Sanskritisation and Hinduisation used for understanding the transformation into caste are inadequate for advancing argument in support of such transformation.

18.6 Basis for misconception

The concepts of caste against which the tribes have been studied have invariably led scholars as noted above to state or conclude that tribes are becoming caste. What this in effect means is that tribes by virtue of moving to this have become like other segments of the Indian society and as such cease to be tribes. There is in fact nothing left in them of what had gone into the making of the tribes. What this has led to, is a kind of conception whereby tribes/ tribal societies by becoming caste, peasant or socially differentiated cease to be tribes or tribal societies. There is then something teleological involved in the study of tribes/ tribal society in the Indian context. Before we begin studying, we already know the direction in which the tribal society is moving. Nowhere is this more obvious than the contrasts against which tribal societies have been studied. Elsewhere in the world where tribes are not linked with the civilization complex, such problems does not arise as tribes there are studied in their own rights and against the backdrop of process at work in those societies. They are not studied against the end point represented

by the communities that are part of civilization as has been the case with India. Hence 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.

It follows as a corollary then that tribes cease to be tribes or the tribal society. And since these are the features with which the general Indian society is characterized, tribes are viewed as absorbed into the general Indian society. As a corollary what follows is that tribes through these processes cease to be tribes and thereby cease to constitute and maintain a separate society and identity. Tribes are primarily being studied from the perspective of how they are getting drawn into mainstream of civilization. The end result is that the reality of caste remains intact but that of tribe disappears and this will increasingly spread as tribal societies come in intensive contact with the outside world. Such an empirical and conceptual scenario in the study of tribes exists in India precisely because of the way (1) tribes have been conceptualized in the anthropological literature and (2) the reference in terms of which they have been investigated. In nutshell, tribes have not been studied in their own right but only in relation to the general Indian society, which was marked by overriding features of caste, peasant and social differentiation.

Now in the conceptualization of tribes in anthropology, three distinct but interrelated elements are intertwined. To begin with, tribes in anthropology 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 either belonging or not belonging to them) and that people belong to society in virtue of rules under which they stand, and which impose on them regular, determinate ways of acting towards and in regard to one another. The characteristic of tribe as a society is related through its boundaries. At the same time, boundaries of tribes have been defined- linguistically, culturally and politically by anthropologists. Boundaries set certain limit of interaction in the legal, political, economic and social relation of its members.

Secondly tribes are also seen as a type of society, a society that is different from other types of societies. Godelier (1977: 30) for example, sees tribal societies as being characterized by certain positive and negative features. The negatives are marked by absence of the positive traits of the modern society viz., non-literate, uncivilized, non-industrialized, non-specialized etc. The positives are those absent from the modern societies viz. social relations based on kinship bond, all pervasive religion, frequency of cooperation for common goal etc.

Thirdly tribes are also seen, as representing a particular stage in the socio-political formation and with passage of time will move to new stage such as nation, nationality or the nationhood. Now while these three distinct aspects have gone in the making of the concept, the last two have overshadowed the first to which the tribes owe their separate and independent existence. What has however happened in the process is that tribes have been primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They are seen as representing a society that lacks positive traits of the modern society.

To put it differently, they constitute primitive, simple, illiterate, and backward societies. With changes in the features that constitute its specific features due education, specialization, modern occupation, new technology etc. tribal society is no longer considered as a tribal society. If the transformation is in the direction of caste then it is described as having become caste society. If the reference is peasant then it is posited as the peasant society and if the general direction of transformation is social differentiation, then it is described as a society socially differentiated. The end result is that tribal society is no

longer considered a tribal society and rightly so if it is thought in terms of stage and the specific features. But as said earlier tribe is also society, similar to any other kind of society but even this comes to be denied with the denial of tribal society as such on account of the changed situation. With this the very existence of tribe as an independent and separate living entity is put to stake. What has happened in the process is that anthropologists and other social scientists have overlooked the context in which the term tribe came to be used in Indian society.

18.03 Action and Reflection

Do you think that tribes in India have not been studied in their own rights but in relation to the general Indian society? Justify your statement.

In the Indian context tribes were identified and described primarily in terms of them being outside the civilization. There is then something clumsy about the use of the concept 'tribe' in describing the Indian social reality. Such problems may not arise when tribes do not coexist with the non-tribal societies. Indeed problems of the type referred above could be overcome by the use of the term 'indigenous' people but not without giving rise to problems of a different dimension. Such a problem is rooted in the concept and conceptual framework that have been used to understand transformation in the tribal society in India. There is then something clumsy and basically wrong with the use of the term tribe in the Indian context.

18.7 Tribe as community

In view of 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 known and addressed as, by the other people surrounding them. It is common experience that groups and communities brought under the broad category of tribe do not identify themselves in terms of tribes, (except by the educated) but by their tribes' name such as the Santhals, the Oraons, the Khasis or the Garos, etc. Even in history this was how groups identified as tribes now were being identified and addressed. Ray (1972: 8-10) points to this in his introductory essay on the volume in Tribal Situation in India. He writes that we know that there were janas or communities of people like the Savaras, the Kullutas, the Kollas, the Bhillas, the Khasa, the Kinnaras and a countless number of many others whom today we know as 'tribes', bearing almost the same recognizable names. Yet the term and concept by which they were known to the multitudes of people were not 'tribes' but jana meaning 'communities of people'.

Hence the point being made here is to study tribes in India in reference to the actual communities they belong to and represent, that is, as the Santhals, the Khasis, the Gonds, etc. If tribes are studied as such, then the kind of problems we are confronted with, when we use the term tribe will be overcome. Transformation occurring in the tribal society either in the direction of caste, peasant, social differentiation, or religion becomes meaningful without in any way affecting the identity of the group concerned. The transformations become meaningful precisely because tribes besides being a type of society and the stage of society are also societies. This means that the terms of reference in the tribal studies are not to be categories as caste, peasant or social heterogeneity but groups or communities such as those of the regional communities- the Bengalis, Assamese, Gujratis, etc.

The counterparts of tribes are not castes or peasants as has been the case so far but communities or societies incorporating castes and peasants, for the latter are not the whole society but only an element of the whole. Tribes on the other hand are whole societies like any other society with their own

language, territory, culture and custom and so on. Hence, as societies they must be compared with other societies and not 'castes' as has been the case in the sociological and anthropological writings. Of course, the perspective may not be useful in case of small tribal groups like the Halpatis, the Dublas, etc.

18.8 Conclusion

The idea of 'tribe' and 'caste' are differing social categories. The two differing social categories are often held wrong by sociologists and anthropologists by and large, by considering tribes in India as a part of larger categories of Indian societies. Till today scholars have not been able to arrive at a systematically worked out criterion towards distinguishing tribe from caste. In general they have tried to distinguish one from the other on the basis of a number of criteria.

It has generally been assumed that the two represent two different forms of social organizations. Castes have been treated as one regulated by the hereditary division of labour, hierarchy, principle of purity and pollution, civic and religious disabilities, etc. Tribes on the other hand have been seen as one characterized by the absence of features attributed to the caste. The two types of social organizations are also considered as governed by the different set of principles.

Therefore, there is a need to understand these two categories in proper perspective. In other words, the terms of reference in the tribal studies should not be considered as categories as caste, peasant or social heterogeneity', but they must be studied as 'groups' or 'actual communities' they belong to and represent, such as, those of the regional communities'. It is common experience that groups and communities brought under the broad category of tribe do not identify themselves in terms of tribes, (except by the educated) but by their tribes' name such as the Santhals, the Oraons, the Khasis or the Garos, etc. This truth also necessitates to understand in proper perspective the notion and process of tribal transformation, Sanskritisation and Hinduisation, language factor in tribal identity, the issue of misconstruction of tribal identity, and community life of tribes.

18.8 Further Reading

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