


Subject: Anthropology

Production of Courseware

 **-Content for Post Graduate Courses**

Paper No. : 04 Indian Anthropology

Module :17 Tribe Caste Continuum



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Description Of Module	
Subject Name	Anthropology
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Learning objectives:

- To understand the term “Tribe”
- To understand the term “Caste”
- To understand their meaning in Indian context
- To understand Tribe-Caste Continuum

Introduction

1. Tribe

The word traces its origin from Latin word *tribus* used to denote the three groups of ancient Romans. In today's context tribe can be defined as any group of people living together for a period of time sharing common history, common territory and common lifestyle. These people usually have their own socio-political organization and are excluded from the state. State here means the civilization. In ancient world when people moved to civilizations and non productive modes of subsistence, some people were required to stay at the periphery or near the forests in order to obtain forest produce esp. honey. While some groups voluntarily refused to be included in the state. These people formed groups which are known as tribes today. So, historically people excluded from the rule of civilization whether voluntarily or involuntarily came to be known as tribes. Lewis H. Morgan (1818–1881) hypothesized tribe as a transient stage in the process of cultural evolution from early hunters and foragers to agrarian societies. Later, Lewis introduced the concept of “scale” in characterizing a tribe. He contended, “Ideally, tribal societies are small in scale, are restricted in the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal, and political relations, and possess a morality, religion, and world view of corresponding dimensions” (1968).



https://mygov.in/sites/default/files/master_image/largeimage/aebc2f9fa8e44b03384576ed0f03c54bc55f7edc.jpg?itok=YFZpVTp6

The usage of word in today's time is ambiguous as many tribal societies do not fit the traditional definition. But still most of them have these basic characteristics:-

- They are politically autonomous. Although most of them have now been included in the state but they still practice some degree of autonomy in terms of social rules and imposing punishments.
- The people of a tribe share a common territory.
- They have a common culture. Culture here includes their system of beliefs, rules, norms, mores, ethics etc.
- They have a common religion i.e. they worship a common god which might be or might not be same as the popular religion or gods.
- A tribe is an endogamous group i.e. they marry within themselves. A tribe is usually divided into 2 moieties or many phratries. These moieties and phratries are connected through a story (myth) of a common (but not consanguine) origin and form intermarrying groups.
- The members of a tribe speak a common language or dialect.
- Tribes are generally egalitarian and no ascriptive hierarchy is found among them.

2. Caste

Caste has derived from Portuguese term *castus* or *casta* literally meaning race or lineage. They used this term to denote the Indian social stratification system. A. L. Kroeber defined caste as “an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions” (1930). So, in easy terms caste can be defined as a system of social stratification the membership of which is ascribed by birth. The system of caste stratification is found in India in its most developed form and is also found in other communities of south Asia. A caste is not an isolated group. Rather it forms a part of society. Hence caste is a form of social grouping within a society.

There are following basic characteristics which define a caste:-

- It is a part of larger society and thus has no individual existence.
- A caste usually forms an endogamous group. The people of caste marry within themselves. An exogamous marriage is usually abhorred.
- They have a distinct set of cultural norms.
- The membership in a caste is ascribed by birth only. That means a person is born in his/her caste and there is no way s/he can change it during his/her lifetime.

- It is a hierarchical system. This implies that one caste is considered higher than the other caste. So caste system does not only categorizes it also differentiates.

Caste system determines a person's status in society. It also affects his/her mode of interaction with other people.

3. Indian scenario

3.1 Tribe

Tribes in Indian context are vastly different from other countries. Here, the tribes have never been completely isolated. They had links with the neighboring communities. These links were varied in nature. For example, tribe often exchanges forest produce for crops such as wheat, rice, maize. During lean seasons, people from tribe also work in the nearby areas as laborers.

Tribal women were often seen (and are still seen) in the caste villages of Rajasthan selling toys for children; earlier they bartered goods in return for clothes (and cupfuls of grain), but today they usually accept money. Similarly, their men are seen selling medicines (of both faunal and floral origin), honey (along with the comb), and charms (amulets and talismans).with time they have also been incorporated in the village hierarchical system.

The religion of the tribal people has also interacted with the popular religion and has given rise to new phenomenon and practices. It has often been noticed that tribal take up practices of the neighboring dominant communities. The Oraons, for example, believe that the entire universe is regulated by a superpower known as Dharmesh, the representations of which are the earth (Dharti), the moon (chando), and the sun (bin), and therefore, the veneration of these natural things is supreme in their worship system. At the same time, they revere Mahadeo Bhagat, a form of the Hindu Sanskrit god, Shiva, and the monkey-god, Hanuman. The Oraon think that Hanuman's native village is Anjani, in the district of Gumla. On ritual occasions, they carry a flag in his honor. For them, their own religion and Hinduism can co-exist without any contradictions. It has also been reported that on the day of Diwali (the 'festival of lights'), the Oraon carry out the 'worship of the fowl' (ranguâ pujâ), which is their indigenous practice, along with the lighting of lamps.



The images of lord Shiva are also prevalent in the tribal art of gond people.

<http://www.myindianculture.com/2011/12/indian-folk-art-tribal-art-paintings.html>

Other than that, many tribal converted to Christianity during British regime. Some common examples are the Khasis, Mizos, Nagas, and other hill tribes.

One more type of religious exchange is tribalisation. The term denotes taking up of tribal practices by other communities. In this context, 2 examples are worth noticing. First is the concept of *gram devta* or village deity. In Hindu religion, there is no reference to such concept of village protector or gram devta. But tribal have always revered to their deity by the boundations of their territory. The neighboring people also seem to have taken up the tradition. Second example is the importance of tribal priest in the coronation of Rajput kings of Rajasthan.

The tribes in India have never been completely isolated. They have been in constant interaction with the mainland population. This interaction has affected both sides and thus given rise to some unique characteristics to Indian society. In some places tribal have assimilated to a great extent in the caste society thus forming their part.

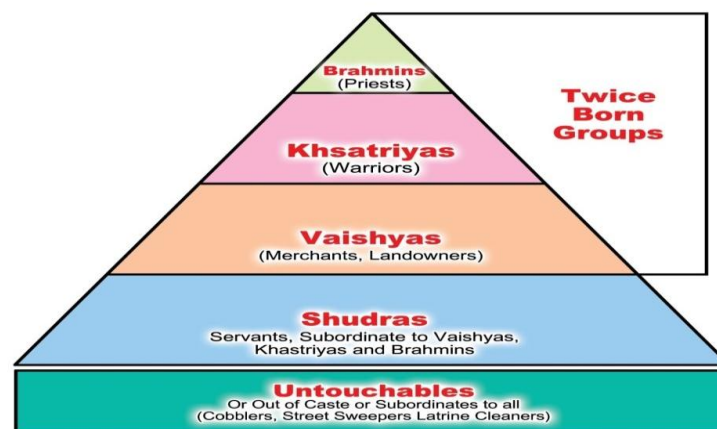
3.2 Caste

In India, caste system is very typical. Since the term does not have an Indian origin, it is hard to find Indian equivalent of the term. Some authors believe that caste represents *Varna* system, while some equate it to *Jati* system.

3.2.1 Varna system.

It is a theoretical model of the stratification of the society. According to this model, there are 4 Varnas into which a society is divided on the basis of occupation and relative purity. These were;

1. **Brahmin** – they are the highest in the caste hierarchy. Brahmins are the intellectuals and they were supposed to live their life with bare necessities. The purpose of life is to collect knowledge. They presided over the religious ceremonies and rituals of the people.
2. **Kshatriya** – their status is somewhat lower than Brahmins. They are the protectors and rulers and are supposed to look after the well being of others. A Kshatriyas duty is to serve his life protecting others.
3. **Vaishyas** – the next are vaishyas. They were the merchants, traders, businessmen etc. their purpose was to accumulate wealth. Hence their status was lower than Brahmins and Kshatriyas.
4. **Shudras** – they are the lowest in caste hierarchy. Their purpose was to serve the other Varnas.



<http://asia.society.org/jati-caste-system-india>

There was one more group, dalits, which were excluded from this system. They were considered to be highly impure group and the services provided to other groups by others were not extended to them. This is a highly static model and does not work in real life.

3.2.2 Jati system.

- *Jati* is the actual grouping of people based on their profession or traditional occupation. Examples are barbers, carpenters etc. The name of *Jati* is based on this occupation only, whether the people of *Jati* follow that profession any more or not. There are more than 3000 *Jatis* in India. A *Jati* is identified in a local setting by whom its members will accept food and water from and to which *Jatis* its members will give food and water. People will try to marry their sons and daughters to members of their same *Jati* and will give their major loyalty to their *Jati*.
- A *Jati*'s position may vary from place to place. A *Jati* considered lower in one area may be considered higher in social strata in other area. Also relative position of a *Jati* can also change with time. The *Jati* moves up the social scale as a group and not as individuals. A *Jati* can improve its position in the class system by advancing economically and emulating social groups with money and power. At the same time, a *Jati* can also move up in the caste hierarchy. This mobility in the caste system is termed as "Sanskritization" by the scholar M.N. Srinivas.
- So while Varna is the blueprint of the social hierarchy, *Jati* is the actual grouping of the people. Hence, caste is equivalent to *Jati* system in India.
- Also, one more thing to be mentioned is that caste is not only a Hindu phenomenon. It is found among people of other caste as well. For ex, Christians of Kerala, Muslims of west Bengal. Also other religions like Buddhism and Sikhism have been officially observed as having caste system in them.

4. Tribe-caste continuum.

- India is unique in terms of its cultural characteristics. The concept of tribe in India is very different from the concept of tribe in Americas. There tribes are isolated communities having a world within themselves but in India tribes have never been fully separate since the very beginning. There has always been a constant interaction between tribal people and the civilization.
- This has led to diminishing of the boundaries between both the populations. Sometimes tribes are so immersed in the structure of society that it is hard to differentiate between tribe and a caste. Anthropologists have differed on the question relating to tribe and caste. According to Ghurye tribal people are backward Hindus differing only in degrees from the other segments of Hindu

society. This is because many tribes have been seen following Hindu religious practices in their very crude form.

- According to N.K Bose there are many similarities in customs between tribes and castes and they are interdependent. Marriage within the clan is forbidden both in the tribe as well as in the caste. Both generally don't encourage marriage outside the group. And also both tend to maintain their group identity.
- But there are few obvious points of difference between both. Max Weber writes in Social Structure that when an Indian tribe loses its territorial significance it assumes the form of an Indian caste. In this way the tribe is a local group whereas caste is a social group.
- According to D.N Majumdar the tribe looks upon Hindu ritualism as foreign and extra -religious even though indulging in it and the in the worship of God and Goddess where as in the caste these are necessary part of the religion.
- In caste individuals generally pursue their own definite occupations because functions are divided under the caste system. In the tribe individuals can indulge in whatever profession they prefer as there is no fixed relation between them and occupation. Members of a same tribe have to pursue different occupation because they are a society within themselves.
- These points of differences and similarities between caste and tribe led to confusion about definition of the terms. Also, there were some populations which fulfill the criteria for both of the terms.
- It is believed that tribes are autochthonous, culturally isolated groups with a distinctive language and religion. However, the plain tribals like the Munda and Oraon of Bihar, the Kachari of Assam and the Gond in certain parts of Madhya Pradesh are regarded as tribals although they live interspersed with Hindu population. Many of the tribals now speak the region language and do not have a distinctive language of their own. Sometimes one tribe may speak different languages in different regions. The Bhil in Rajasthan speak Hindi and the Bhil of Gujarat speaks Gujarati.
- Also in some areas of India some castes occupy certain villages or a whole area and are a society within themselves. All the strata of the society are occupied by a single caste only, similar to that of a tribe. For example, ingonia, a remote village in Rajasthan belongs to nats caste people. The fishing villages of Coromandel Coast are inhabited by a single ethnic group; the pattinavar caste.
- This makes it hard to distinct between tribe and caste.

- Fredrick Bailey in his book "Tribe, Caste and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change' said that "*the only solution to this problem is to postulate a continuum, at one end of which is a society whose political system is entirely of the segmentary egalitarian type, and which contains no dependants whatsoever; and at the other end of which is a society in which segmentary political relations exist only between a very small proportion of the total society, and most people act in the system in the role of dependants.*"
- Bailey's argument is that a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is segmentary and egalitarian. But in contemporary India both caste and tribe are being merged into a different system which is neither one nor the other.
- This concept was inspired from Robert Redfield's ideas of folk-urban continuum and his study of peasant society. According to this concept, there are no urban or rural societies in the strict sense but only a continuation along the same lines. The societies vary in their proximity to any of these poles. Bailey thought that a concept like that also needed in India.
- Hence came up the concept of tribe-caste continuum. According to this concept, there are no tribes or castes in the strict sense, but various communities *varying* in their proximity to either of these. In such a scenario it is hard to differentiate between the two.
- Although it is important to note that when bailey talks of tribe-caste continuum, he talks of it in strictly socio-political sense. According to him the social structure and political system are most easily affected by the neighboring communities and can change to a system which suits them in the best way.
- Another important work in this regard has been done by Eschmann and Schnepel. They talk of it in relation to religious cults and practices. According to them. For example the concept of divine is varying in the two. While in a caste society divine is an image through which deity appears and can be approached by men but in tribes, divine possess human beings and in this form can interact with the normal people. Also the difference between tribe and Hindu caste is in terms of general and local, where tribe represents local customs and caste represents general which encompasses these local traditions.
- This continuum can also be understood as a result of interaction between Redfield's little and great traditions. Here *Jati* or caste can be taken as a part of great tradition while tribe as a part of little traditions. the presence or references of tribes like khasis and bhils in the epics and texts of the great traditions like Mahabharata and Ramayana etc go to prove that despite their general isolation the tribes did maintain, though occasionally cultural contacts with the larger Hindu society. The absorption, into great tradition, of several traits from little tradition because of occasional contacts

is also responsible for the tribe-caste continuum. N.K. Bose in his book *Hindu methods of tribal absorption* (1941) showed the mode of absorption of *Jati* influence by the primitive tribes of Orissa. Martin Orans (1965) study santhal: a tribe in search of great tradition goes on to show, how on a different plane many tribes in India are being attracted towards the complex belief of high Hinduism. In certain cases the process of hinduisation of tribes, due to intimate cultural contacts, has been so rapid that such tribes remain tribes for the namesake only. However, the concept of tribe-caste continuum has gained currency in the writings of social analysts.

- Although it is not to be understood that the change in these societies can be perceived in terms of this model only. Bailey himself clarifies that both these societies are fast changing in India and these are merging into a system which is neither one nor the other. Hence this model has limited practical value.
- When talking about religious continuum model of Eschmann and Schnepel, Pfeffer says that the comparison drawn between tribal and popular religion are not foolproof. Although both might share a common practice but the value behind the same can vary. And there is no way to identify who borrowed from whom.

5. Summary

To summarize, tribe and caste in India are a result of ongoing process of interaction over a period of thousands of years and both have borrowed from each other. To an extent that the line of difference between both has diminished. So tribe and caste form two ends of a same continuum in between of which the caste and tribal societies of India lie. but the same is not true for all societies and also not for all aspects of society. Regardless of these drawbacks, the model is good enough to understand the cultural milieu of India.