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**"The Politics of languages, religion and identity: Articulation of social  
difference of tribes in North East India."**

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**ABSTRACT**

Languages and regions are essential indicators of distinction, each on its own, but in the Indian sense, they appear to align with each other. Indeed, together, in the post-independence period, they were the guiding force behind the reorganisation of culture and politics in India. However, while significant, languages and regions do not tell us much about the inner workings of the culture and politics they represent. What is perhaps more surprising is that cultures are enormously identical in their social features despite variations dependent on languages and locations, with faith and caste prevailing among them. Religion and caste, in reality, cut through regions and languages, and to that extent constitute the popular threads across the diversity of languages and regions.

**Introduction:**

The general premise underpinning the idea of tribes in India is that they are classes and cultures situated on the periphery of Indian society. They are seen to have been attracted and incorporated into Indian society throughout history through a number of social and political mechanisms. But the process of integration was far from full when India became independent in 1947. In the post-independent phase, the role of the intelligentsia in general and that of the Indian state, in particular with regard to the tribes, was one of incorporating them into the broader Indian community. Tribes were constituted as individuals who practise animism or tribal religion for colonial cum ethnographers, in such conceptualisation, colonial administration identified tribes as groups beyond historical and textual religions and their related social organisation. Of note, the study did not rule out such parameters, such as primitive living circumstances and living in solitude, but adopted them mostly like a corollary of the first postulate.

Tribes, in general, have been identified in anthropological literature in terms of languages, history, territory and government. In terms of the comparison with the general or fundamental character of Indian culture rather than the individual traits they exhibited, tribes came to be conceptualised residually. This is not to suggest that the fundamental traits were ignored; instead of that, the conceptualisation of tribes was not at the centre level. It was not so much the dominant characteristics, including caste and faith that applied to citizens at the grassroots stage. Languages and history, now sometimes referred to as race, were what counted most, and were deemed the most pronounced indicators of differentiation. Tribes were inevitably placed toward the dominant ethnic group in the ethnic sense, which often turned out to be a distinct linguistic and cultural group. This is apparent from the view that their ethnic or group name is addressed to the tribal, which generally refers to their various languages or dialects. Moreover, in the sociological discourses on tribes, this element of tribal naming has been neglected. What has been ignored are the distinctions based on which persons themselves distinguished between each other in the effort to discriminate based on general or standardised characteristics.

**Recognition of Differences; Viewpoints of social science:**

Tribes were shown not to be part of the civilisation and were thus seen beyond the broader Indian society's system. However, they were seen not as marginalised yet, at least in the case of those on the fringes of the broader Indian community, as being in continuous contact with the so-called civilisation. Therefore, because of the acculturation process arising from their communication and association with broader Indian culture, tribal cultures have been seen as experiencing transition. In terms of tribes being part of the broader Indian community, this phase of aggregation has been considered. Kosambi (1975) thus refers to the development and advancement of Indian civilisation arising from a convergence of tribes and broader Indian society components. Boss (1941) refers to the mechanism of how tribes were pulled into the social organisation of the broader Indian society's development structure, which offered defence and support invariably. This was how tribes were incorporated into the broader Indian culture, according to him. He named the procedure the Hindu tribal absorption system. Srinivas (1977) speaks of the Sanskritization mechanism in which the lower-ranking castes emulated the higher ranking castes' way of life. While the idea of Sanskritization has been explicitly used to explain the processes of social mobility within the structure of the caste, the mechanism of transition in the sense of tribal culture has also been applied to consider. Sinha (1962) often refers to the cycles of Sanskritization and Hinduization, but these arise inevitably within the context of state development, according to him.

Now, tribes are at least remembered in this view of Indian civilisation and its societal transition as individuals of distinct languages, beliefs, practises, rituals, and, above all, social organisation. Indeed, in the study and comprehension of the transition of tribal cultures, these disparities serve as a starting point. They refer out how they begin out abandon their distinct identity when tribes come into touch with the broader Indian community and are incorporated into the latter. According to this line of reasoning, this phase of social change leaves tribes without their own distinct identity and room; whether they have an identity at all, within the overarching organisational and hierarchical framework of the caste system, this is an identity

only as a caste.

### **The political thought of G.S. Ghurye and the Right- wing:**

In his book, the so-called Aborigines and their Future, Ghurye argued in favour of identifying tribals as Hindus; the word he used was 'backward Hindus.' Since it was first released in 1943 under a different title, The Scheduled Tribes, the book has been released many times. In India, Ghurye separates tribes into three groups: those who are adequately integrated; those who are loosely integrated; and those who are touched only by Hinduism. He says, referring to the last party, that the only reasonable definition of these individuals is that they are a perfectly integrated community of Hindu society and that they are backward Hindus. He argues this claim on the basis that Hinduism and the animist tribal faith were very close, and that the two could not possibly be differentiated from each other. This claim was focused not on field studies, but some of the census commissioner's findings and statements between 1891 and 1931, demonstrating their frustration with the fact that tribes were identified as animists. It is an open secret, of course, that Ghurye made his findings based on exceedingly limited data and the very restricted usage of the remarks and findings of the commissioner of the census.

Indeed, the conceptualisation of tribes as 'backward Hindus' by Ghurye set the stage for a future line of thought in India regarding tribes. The study of the Christian missionary Activity Enquiry Committee noticed a rather powerful echo. The committee was formed to investigate the actions of Christian missionaries, monitoring the conversion to Christianity by tribes in the formerly undivided state of Madhya Pradesh, more commonly known as the Niyogi committee after its leader. In favour of its own decision, the committee quoted an excerpt from Ghurye's novel. Since then, among right-wing Hindu social and political movements, the belief that tribal people are Hindu has become a popular refrain. In its speeches on tribes in India, the stance is echoed and expressed vigorously by the Sangh Parivar. This, too, has been the trend of thought regarding today's Indian tribes.

In colonial literature, based on their distinctive beliefs, tribes were categorised, but they were also defined based on other factors, especially their isolation from the broader society. According to the above view, tribes were deemed to be a society of their own and, thus, to represent a separate culture in comparison to the broader community. As far as the adherents of Hindutva are concerned, what is fresh is that they have started to think of tribes in terms of faith only. However, even here, the Hindutva promoter takes a different stance from the imperial point of view.

Tribes were known as animists according to colonial norms, an indication that they adhere to a religious culture rather than that of India's major faiths. The Hindutva Supporter, however, quickly ignored this reality and classified them as Hindus. They have, now, moved much farther. They started to refuse the title of tribes to those who otherwise belong to the same racial community, speak the same languages, follow the same social structure, but who observe and subscribe to a tradition other than the Hindu religious culture, in line with their modern understanding of the principles of tribes. As seen in the recent attacks on tribal Christians in India, articulation, hitherto doormat and dormant, has now come to the forefront. As the media analysis of these attacks shows, the Sangh Parivar practises

having frequently firmly and actively proclaimed that if they become Christian, tribes cease to be tribes. They also demand that as they qualify for employment and other public benefits, tribes must define themselves as Christians and not as tribes, on the basis that when they become Christians, they cease to be tribes and are thus unable as tribes to qualify for state benefits.

Such theories today not only challenge the general anthropological perception of tribes but also struggle against the core theories and spirit underlying India's Constitution. Any people or individuals were recognised as tribes not because they practised a common faith, but because under the Indian constitutions they were enumerated as scheduled tribes. These individuals or societies are planned as tribes not because they follow a unique faith community, but because they represent a specific community different from the prevailing ethnic population. Besides, they use their languages and have a particular social structure and way of life, very distinct from that of the dominant cultural group.

#### **Anthropology Reading versus Political- Administrative practices:**

It is a mystery that, in the post-independence century, the historical and anthropological interpretation of the dominant tribes in social science literature had no impact on mainstream thought regarding tribes. Indeed, legislative and functional processes surrounding tribes are affected more by the popular thought than analysis derived from social science inquiry. The mainstream thought in social science in one community and the traditional and practised government and administrative thought in another. This is contradictory with how anthropology worked under colonialism. Anthropology was, therefore, an organ of imperial concern and was thus the handmaiden of the colonial regime. However, in the post-colonial era, despite the involvement in the state administration of noted anthropologists as advisors or administrators, the role of anthropological writing in shaping state policy and strategy about tribes was almost negligible unless it was convenient for the prevailing political thought regarding tribes. For example, state policy and institutional procedures relating to tribes are contradictory to anthropological knowledge of them in matters of languages, history, and faiths.

#### **Challenges to principles and theories of social science:**

The grouping of tribes as Hindus contributes to problems in philosophical and scientific terms. To start with, a debatable issue is whether tribes can be regarded as Hindus. The religious traditions of Hindus and tribes have many parallels and variations. However, Hindutva's characters have conveniently ignored the discrepancies. Moreover, when it comes to comparisons, considering tribes as Hindus are not tenable. Based on two forms of data, parallels have been drawn. The first is the impact on tribes of Hinduism, and the second is a resemblance attributed to the fact that all are religions by design to a larger or lesser degree. There is no denying that there has been a great deal of giving and receiving between the two denominations.

Nevertheless, the effects of Hinduism on tribes, while current, are not sufficient reasons to classify tribes as Hindus. The feature of natural religion is the second element that has been related to. Tribal worship holds many characteristics in common with Hinduism as regular worship, as it does with the religious traditions of American and African groups. However, it is uncertain if Hinduism can be identified as the religious traditions of tribes in the Americans or Africa, or if these

tribes can be referred to as Hindus. Indian tribes were classified and Hindus and, thus, smacks of ethnic and theological expansionism. Only because there are certain parallels, their distinct culture and sovereignty should not be refused to the tribes. It is necessary to remember that traditions do not only have rituals. It requires thoughts and values, as well. This reality, however, is mostly glossed over in their studies and evaluations of tribal religions, including by sociologists and social anthropologists. In such debates, the reality that communities have their vision of the universe is not provided with some position or acknowledgement.

Second, if tribes are to be called Hindus, then the whole historical phase portrayed by historians to justify Indian civilisation's creation and growth is subject to disagreement, and even rejection. With the philosophical machinery of Hinduization, acculturations, assimilations, and integration established and used to grasp Indian society's complexities, the same will be the case. Hinduism is strictly related to the caste structure, and it is not so much against faith as against caste that literature in social science has usually posited the collective organisation of the tribes. This makes it difficult for a tribe to both be a Hindu and a part of a tribe. Only at the cost of sacrificing one's tribal identity will one be a Hindu. The two will not go together. Of instance, a new rank may be gained; however, the new status is a caste rather than a tribe. That is how social sciences have seen social change among tribes, including historians and anthropologists.

#### **Constitutional provision: Recognition of Difference**

Deliberations on the tribal issue by academics, officials, social workers, and policymakers in the first few decades after independence centred on the need to promote the incorporation of tribes into broader society. Since then, politicians, planners, academicians, and officials at the national level have been talking about the state policy surrounding tribes as one of incorporation. It is a separate matter that there exists no specific declaration or text with relation to the strategy to be followed against tribes with post-independence India.

The state policies and attitudes towards tribes could be, however, be discerned from the kinds of provisions laid down for tribes in the Indian Constitution. Legislative approval, proportionate participation in parliament, the ability to use one's languages for educational and other reasons, the ability to confess one's religion in freedom of conscience, and the right to seek economic and social growth according to one's ability are part of the unique arrangement for tribes. The Constitution also empowers the state to provide for rights in the field of employment and positions for tribes. The constitutions often allow the state to put regions populated by tribes under the fifth or sixth orders for special consideration concerning the management of tribal communities. Moreover, the Directive's ideals of secular state policy demand that the educational and economic priorities of the lower sections of society, including the tribal sectors, should be specifically supported.

Now if the particular clause found in the Constitution for the tribes is carefully interpreted, one sees that these provisions show an approach that can be sociologically defined. However, the term 'integration.' The purpose of the constitutional provisions on reservations in the fields of education, employment, political participation and administration of tribal areas, as well as the requirements laid down in the principles of State policy of the Directives, is to get the tribes closer to the mainstream Indian society. The Constitution also provides not only for the

preservation and security of the tribes' cultures, customs, and practices but also for their preservation.

**A rupture between constitutional provisions and Administrative and political practices:**

Despite the declaration of exalted principles and the adaptation of numerous statutory and legal frameworks for tribal people's security and wellbeing, real progress has gone in the opposite direction of what has been promised. Indeed, in this sense, the success of the state was more in the direction of expanding civil and political rights to tribes in relation to the broader community to which they were attached. Thus, the gains were more in the direction of getting the tribes closer to the state and the broad Indian population through initiatives such as political settlement, schooling, and government jobs. The lack of progress, however, was most striking precisely in the area of preserving their culture and heritage, so central to the ethos of integration defined as underlying the national tribal strategy by scholars and administrators. The security of tribal lands has poorly been enforced in their structure of life care, although at least some symbolic attempts have been made in this respect, both in terms of law and enforcement.

The Constitution acknowledges the distinct cultural characteristics of the communities, in particular about their languages and conversations of security and promotion. Around the same period, as part of the process of incorporation into more incredible Indian culture and governance, residency privileges have been provided to tribes. An ethnic or linguistic group can maintain its cultures, dialects and history, according to Article 29 of the Constitution. It also states that the state will not implement any other languages or customs on them by statute. Furthermore, Article 350a allows for training facilities in the primary stage of schooling in the mother tongue.

Moreover, the national, state and municipal governments have made little attempt to preserve tribal languages, much less their promotions, so far. Instead, schooling, also at the primary stage, has been taught in the languages of the majority group in all states and union territories. Primers were prepared in some tribal languages for pedagogical purposes in the mother tongue in a state such as undivided Bihar, but these were left to rot in government godowns.

Another field where the state disputes the distinctiveness of groups is the realm of faith. One of the essential parameters used for the delineation of groups as tribes was faiths, as mentioned earlier. In general, tribes were recognised and delineated vis-à-vis more incredible Indian culture, which predominantly practised Hinduism, but also included followers of other faiths. Tribes, by comparison, were described as those communities that practised animism. This is how tribes have been distinguished from the majority of the nation. However, various forms of social organisation and different languages, rituals, beliefs, and religious activities were often reflected by those who embraced animism. In the delineation of clans, they were tacit and not clearly expressed.

The politics of faith also gained traction following the inception of different religious electors in 1909. The Hindu association wanted to get back to the Hindu fold someone with questionable standing. Therefore, as was the case in the earlier census enumeration, these groups united communities to enumerate themselves as Hindus rather than as animists or local faith followers. In the Sundar account of the

Indian census (sundar1999), a synoptic and informative view of this strategy is accessible to Vis-a-Vis tribes. The designation of tribal religion lasted until the 1941 census, when it was substituted by the group of tribal descent, notwithstanding the enumeration of tribes as animists. However, both tribal roots and tribal religion/animism were done away with as the basis for census enumeration shortly after independence. Instead, whether they were not followers of any other large faiths, tribals continued to be enumerated as Hindus.

#### **Articulation of Difference and identity:**

The language environment falls within the state's control and thus is part of the state's institutional activities. The religious sphere falls under the authority of the federal administrative system and the decision to enumerate tribes as Hindus were made at the federal administrative level thus dropping the previous tradition of enumerating them under the definition of 'tribal faith'. Paradoxically, the ruling coincides with the introduction of a constitution that, concerning their cultures, customs and custom, offers security for tribes. The federal and state-level implementation of these institutional procedures was the product of the compulsion of provincial and national politics. The goal of regional politics was to integrate linguistic and cultural identity by incorporating tribes. The national strategy sought to reinforce the indigenous Hindu political ideology, which since the 1930s has been vigorously and coercively expressed.

Despite the attempts over the last 59 years to absorb administrative practises at both the central and state levels, achieving the constitutional objective is still an elusive goal, and in the future, it will become even more elusive. This is clear from the kinds of claims rendered today by tribes in numerous parts of the world.

Tribes have also been faced with other issues. Although India introduced well-meaning constitutional and legal arrangements for its security, health, and prosperity after independence, real actions have disproved this dream. Regularly, tribal people have endured neglect, injustice, exploitation, and bigotry in nearly every area of life. The government's reaction to the tribes' issues was lukewarm, dismissive, and sometimes aggressive. The emerging middle class noticed this experience more intensely. That explains why the assertion of identification among tribes that now have a sizable middle class has increased.

The current social uprising was encouraged by the unequal treatment provided by the broader community or by the state to tribes. Therefore, in the context of mobilisations against the alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes and against state-sponsored construction ventures contributing to displacement, there have been growing demands to protect rights and influence over land and other properties. What we have witnessed is the demand for greater political power and autonomy, which has moved more often than not, either within or outside the Indian Union, in the direction of a demand for a separate state. This personality articulation has not been limited to the struggle for emancipation. The demand for the promotion and revitalisation of tribal languages, including the creation of primers and other literature and the introduction of them in schools, is also seen. The demand for script production, as in the case of the Santhals and the Tripuri-speaking tribes of Tripura, is linked to this. As in the case of the Bodos of Assam, the collection of a script from among those with whom the tribal people are acquainted is also part of identity articulation. The articulation of nationalism for more significant political influence,

albeit limited, has to do with distinguishing tribes and non-tribes in order to achieve economic and political power. In the other hand, the language-related and cultural revolution is mainly concerned with enriching the substance of the identification generated in the contact phase between tribes and non-tribes.

The articulation of personality among the tribes where a skilled middle class has arisen is most prominent. The greater the educated middle class, the more they express their identity. The consciousness evident in such articulation of identity, however, is not the knowledge of tribes as a category, but the knowledge of being an individual distinct from others, and especially of being distinct from the dominant regional culture. In this articulation, the identification manifested is one of being either Santhal or a Khasi or a Bodo, individuals traditionally identified as tribes. Sometimes, like Naga, Kuki, and Adivasi, the articulation of such identification has taken on a more common term. In the area of languages and history, the articulation of the former was most apparent. The articulation of the above in the area of politics has been the most noticeable.

### **Conclusion:**

The truth has been quite the reverse, considering the constitutional clause aimed at ensuring the growth of the tribes without creating aggression against their languages and culture. There have been attempts at the violent integration of communities into the existing regional community's languages and religion. Moreover, in terms of access to the fruits of development, such convergence has been deferred and even resisted overall. While obtaining some direct rewards in exchange, the privileges of tribes to property, woodland, and other properties have been usurped. This constitutes the systemic climate for the rise of identity politics amongst tribes in India.

In general, identity politics among tribes has been described as the politics of tribal identity. Such a definition is, in my opinion, deceptive. There is a rupture in the way the tribal people themselves interpret tribal social consciousness, and the way writers, officials, and others portray it. Tribal identification is invariably viewed by the latter as a way of identifying these persons. Such an articulation or representation of personality, though, is not concomitant with tribal consciousness. Tribals also have little knowledge of the designation of the intended tribes or their equivalents from Hindi or regional languages. Such an articulation forms part of the legal and administrative practises and is only a small part of the tribes' general consciousness. The articulation of tribal identification is mainly connected to the state and its riches or to the advantages it may render available. Tribal culture thus appears further in the sense of the tribal people's interaction with the administration, the reservation hospital, and other aspects of affirmative action. Group culture would not reach the world of social and cultural existence as part of the group consciousness. Tribal consciousness, thus, is more like a middle-class consciousness than tribal consciousness in general.

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