

AN ARTICLE ON IMPORTANCE OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF TRIBES IN INDIA

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Abstract

*The geographical distribution of tribes in India is important given how land use and territory occupied frame as central issues for most tribal groups. Many tribal groups draw claims to territory by asserting to be the original settlers of the land. In fact the term 'Adivasi' self-preferred by many tribal groups to describe their community in the literal sense means Adi or earliest time and vasi or resident of, which can be translated as the original inhabitants of a particular location. However, the constitutionally approved official term in much of the discourses on tribal groups is 'Scheduled Tribes'. For tribes living near **protected forests** for example, preventing them from extracting forest resources can push them towards subsistence agriculture, which might not leave much for the entire population in the community. Many individuals might then suffer from chronic hunger because of insufficient supply of food for all.*

Key Words: *Geographical Distribution, Protected forests, Human Anthropology, Inhabitats.*



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Discussion and Result:

Although the social hierarchies in much of rural India are influenced by the caste system, Scheduled Tribes fall outside them because of their distinct non-Hindu cultural and religious identity. A prominent feature among Scheduled Tribes is their isolation and remoteness from the mainstream although many tribes have been assimilated into it. This isolation can stem from geographic uniqueness of their locations. Thus even after being assimilated into the mainstream, these groups lay a claim to the region they have historically been inhabiting.

The settlements are on sites which the tribal groups find suitable for habitation on the basis of ease of resource access, availability of food, climatic features, and rituals, etc. Such locations can be isolated where the tribal group in question is separated from the outside world or it can be close to areas of human habitation. Also geographical features such as mountains and rivers can act as a boundary to separate tribal groups from the outside world. Often such markers are selected by tribal groups in choosing to inhabit a location. Thus, one can see that

the geographically unique territorial spaces are instrumental in tribal inhabitations and the tribes in turn influence the spaces they occupy in mutually interactive environs.

DISTRIBUTION OF INDIAN TRIBES: GROUPS AND SUB-GROUPS

India contains an unparalleled variety of ethnic groups, patterns of culture and modes of living. The People of India Project of the Anthropological Survey of India has identified about 461 tribal communities of India out of which 174 have been identified as sub-groups. They number about 67,758,000 according to the 1991 Census comprising about 8.01 per cent of the total population of the country.

Even though there is not a single and definite system of classifying the tribes of India, attempts have been made by different anthropologists from time to time to distribute the tribes. There are mainly two categories to classify the tribes.

They are:

I) Permanent traits : This includes factors like geography/ territory, language, physical/racial attributes and size.

II) Non-Permanent or acquired traits: This includes factors like economy or subsistence pattern and the degree of incorporation into the Hindu society.

1. Geographical

The tribes of India are dispersed widely over geographical territory and scholars have attempted to arrange them along the regions they inhabit. Based on the geographical location and the tribal demographical set-up, anthropologists have tried to chalk out a zonal classification or a regional grouping of the tribes of India.

B.S. Guha has classified the tribes of India into three zones:

- i. The north and north-eastern zone in the mountain valleys and eastern frontiers of India.
- ii. The central or middle zone occupying the older hills and plateaus along the dividing line between the Peninsular India and the Indo-Gangetic Plains including the converging line of the Western Ghats.
- iii. The southern zone comprising the whole of the Peninsular India.

Tribal Cosmogenies D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan in their book *Introduction to Social Anthropology* (1956) have also offered a similar classification. They are Northern and North-Eastern Zone, the Central or Middle Zone and the Southern Zone. S.C. Dube has demarcated four geographical regions including the North and North-Eastern Zone, Middle Zone, the

South Zone and the West Zone. Taking into consideration the zonal classification given by different anthropologists from time to time and keeping in mind the geographical, ecological, socio-economic, administrative, ethnic and racial factors, L.P.Vidyarthi put forward a five-fold classification system which included the following: the Himalayan region, Middle India, Western India, South India and the Islands.

I) **The Himalayan region** is sub-divided into:

A) North-eastern Himalayan region comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and the mountain region of West Bengal including Darjeeling.

B) Central Himalayan region comprising the Terai areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

C) North-Western Himalayan region comprising the states of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Akas, Daflas, Apatanis, Mishmis, Khamptis, Singphos, Kukis, Khasis, Garos, Lepchas, Bhotias, Tharus, etc.

II) **Middle India Region** comprising the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. About 55% of the total tribal population of the country lives in this region. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Juangs, Kharia, Khonds, Bhumijis, Baiga, Muria, Marias, Mundas, Gonds, Santhals, Oraons, etc.

III) **Western India Region** comprising the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa and the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Barodias, Bharwads, Bhils, Damors, Dhanwars, Dhodias, Girasias, Gonds, Katkaris, Koknas, Kolis, Minas, Siddi, Warlis, etc.

IV) **South India Region** comprising the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Chenchus, Irulas, Paniyans, Kurumbas, Kadars, Todas, Badagas, Kotas, etc.

V) **The Island Region** comprising the islands of Andaman and Nicobar in the Bay of Bengal and Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Jarwas, Onges, the Great Andamanese, North Sentinelese, etc.

K.S. Singh has offered a similar classification of tribes of India into the Northeastern India, Middle India, Southern India, North-western Himalayas, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands Zones. Within this geographical classification, there is a lot of disparity in regards to the distribution of the tribal population of the country. We can come across a very high

concentration of the tribal population in the eight states of the central **Migrant Tribes / Nomads**

or middle India comprising of about 85 percent of the total tribal population.

This is followed by the eight north-eastern states comprising of about 11 percent while the rest is distributed over the states and union territories of the northern and southern India.

However, if we try to see the ratio of the tribal population to the total population, we can find that the ratio is high in the north-eastern states except Assam. It ranges from 64-95 per cent in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh and between 30-35 percent in Tripura and Manipur. The ratio is over 90 percent in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep whereas it ranges from 22-23 percent in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh in central India. In the rest of the country the ratio ranges from as low as 1-12 percent.

Besides the zonal and geographical distribution, tribes have also been classified on the basis of their ecological habitat. On this basis they are classified as those who live in the hills (Hill Karbis, Hill Tiwas of Assam), plains (Bodos, Singphos), (Kadars of Kerala), rural, urban and industrial areas.

2. Linguistic

Besides classifying the tribes according to territory, they are also classified according to language or linguistic categories. Four broad language groups have been identified amongst the tribes of India which are Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman.

Tracing the linguistic map of India, we can see that the tribal people of India speak different languages in different regions and groups. One can find that the Dravidian language is spoken in southern India and in some pockets in central India; the Austro-Asiatic language is spoken in some pockets in the north-eastern Himalayan region of Meghalaya, in Nicobar Islands and most part of central India; the Tibeto-Burman language is spoken in the entire Himalayan region whereas the Indo-Aryan language is spoken in the remaining areas of the rest of the country.

L.P Vidyanthi and Binay Kumar Rai in their book "*The Tribal Culture of India*" put forward the following classificatory system of the languages of Indian tribes:

I) Dravidian

All the tribes of southern India as well as the Gonds and Oraons of central India speak languages belonging to the Dravidian language family. The Gondi language spoken by the

Gonds who spread from Uttar Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh and from Maharashtra to Orissa belong to this language family. Other languages belonging to this family is the Kui language which is spoken by the Kandh of Orissa, Kurukh spoken by the Oraons of central India, Tulu language spoken by the Malerus of Karnataka. The languages spoken by the Todas, Palliyans and Irulas of Tamil Nadu, the Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh, and Kadars of Kerala also belong to the Dravidian language family.

II) **Austro-Asiatic**

The Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya speak in language belonging to the Austric language family. Apart from them, the Mundas (Bihar), Santhals (West **Tribal Cosmogenies** Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Tripura), Hos (Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh), Saoras (Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Orissa), Bondos (Orissa) and Korkus (Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) speak languages belonging to the Austric or Mundarian language family as it is sometimes called.

This family is again sub-divided into the following sub-groups:

A) Mon-Khmer Branch: Languages of this family are found in certain pockets of the north-Himalayan region of Meghalaya spoken by the Khasis and the Jaintias as well as the Nicobarese of the Nicobar Islands.

B) Munda Branch: Santhali spoken by the Santhals, Gutob spoken by the Gadabas; Kharia of South Munda sub-branch; Korwa spoken by Kodaku; Korku of North Munda sub-branch, Juang of the central Munda sub-branch

C) Kherwarian group: Ho

III) **Tibeto-Chinese**

This family is again sub-divided into the following sub-groups:

A) Siamese-Burmese: The Tai group of people including Khamptis and the Phakials speak languages belonging to this family

B) Tibeto Burman:

i) Tibeto-Himalayan Branch: Bhotia, Khampa, Memba, Ladakhi spoken by the Mons; Kagati, Sherpa

ii) Western sub-group of Prenominalised Himalayan group: Chamba, Lahauli spoken by Lahaula; Swangli; Kinnauri spoken by the Kinnaura

- iii) Non- Prenominalised Himalayan group: Rongke spoken by the Lepchas; Toto spoken by the Totos
- iv) Arunachal Branch: Hrusso spoken by the Akas; Miri spoken by the Miris, Mishmi spoken by the Mishmis, Nocte; Sulung, Tagin
- v) Assam-Burmese Branch:
 - a) Bodo group: Kachari, Dimasa, Garo, Mikir spoken by the Karbis, Koch, Dowyan spoken by the Tiwas, Rabha
 - b) Naga Group: Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Sema, Rengma, Lotha, Konyak, Maram, Phom,
 - c) Kuki-Chin Group: Hmar, Koireng, Langang, Monsang, Moyon, Paite; Vaiphei; Zou
 - d) Kachin Group: Singpho

Apart from the Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya, all the other tribes of north-east India and the Himalayan region speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family.

IV) *Indo-Aryan*

The tribes of Gujarat, Rajasthan and the Indo-Gangetic Plain speak languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family. Some of the languages belonging to this family include Chattisgarhi, Gujarati; Marathi, Assamese; Oriya; Baigana spoken by the Baigas; Banjari spoken by the Banjaras; Bhili spoken by the Bhils; Dardic spoken by the Broqpas; Gujjari spoken by the Gujjars;

Migrant Tribes / Nomads

The entire group of Austric language speaking people and 80 percent of the Tibeto-Burman speaking people are identified as tribal communities. On the other hand a meagre 3 percent of the Dravidian language speaking people and almost 1 percent of the Indo-Aryan speaking people are identified as tribal people. There is yet another language family spoken by the tribes of the Andaman Islands like the Great Andamanese, the Onges, Jarawas and the Sentinelese. They are loosely called the Andamanese language family.

3. Racial

On the basis of the physical attributes, anthropologists have tried to categorise the tribal population from time to time. But due to the lack of available knowledge and scanty direct evidence, the determination of the racial genesis and affinities of the tribal communities of India is a very complicated task. The first attempt to categorise the Indian tribal communities in a scientific manner based on the racial characteristics was done by Sir Herbert Risley. He

classified the entire population of the country into seven racial types which are Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid and the Dravidian. No separate classificatory scheme for the tribal population was given.

Amore recent attempt of classification was given by J.H. Hutton, S.C. Guha and D.N. Majumdar out of which the most accepted classification is that offered by S.C. Guha who listed six main races with nine sub-types. They are as follows:

- I) Negrito II) Proto- Australoid III) Mongoloid
- A) Paleo-Mongoloids- Long-headed and Broad-headed
- B) Tibeto-Mogoloids
- IV) Mediterranean
- A) Palaeo- Mediterranean B) Mediterranean C) Oriental type
- V) Western Brachycephals
- A) Alpinoid B) Dinaric C) Armenoid
- VI) Nordic

Guha has also drawn conclusions as regards to the racial composition of the tribes of India. They are:

- I) Negrito II) Proto-Australoid III) Mongoloid

At present the racial composition of the tribes of India include the following:

I) Proto-Australoid: The tribes of middle India like the Mundas, the Oraons, the Hos, the Gonds, the Khonds, etc. belong to the Proto-Australoid stock. This group is characterized by dark skin colour, short to medium stature, low forehead, sunken nose, dark complexion and curly hair.

II) Mongoloid: The tribes of north-eastern India and the Himalayan region belong to this group. They have the typical features of straight hair, flat nose, prominent cheek bones and almond shaped eyes with the epicanthic fold present and yellowish skin colour. They have medium stature, high head and medium nose.

III) Dravidian: The tribes of South India like the Kadars, the Irulas and the Paniyans.

IV) Negrito: The GreatAndamanese, Onges, Sentinelese having frizzy hair have Negrito strains. The Siddis who migrated from the African shores of course belong to the Negrito group.

4 Size

Anthropologists have also attempted to classify the tribal groups according to their demographic size. It is interesting to note that tribal populations of India vary immensely with regards to their respective sizes. On one hand we find tribal communities like the Gonds, Bhils, (both designated with their generic names) with a population of about forty lakhs each followed by the Santhals

with a population of more than thirty lakhs. They are followed by the Oraons, Minas and the Mundas who number about more than ten lakhs each. They are followed by the Hos, Khonds and the Kols with population strength of more than five lakhs.

Yet another more than forty tribes, comprising about ten percent of the total tribal population of India have a population ranging from one to five lakhs. These are the Adis, Baigas, Bhumijis, Bodos-Kacharis, Dhodias, Garos, Kacharis, Kharias, Kharwars, Khasis, Kolhas, Korkus, Lodhas, Mizos, Rabhas, Saoras, Tripuris, Warlis, Yenadis and Yerukulas, to name a few.

On the contrary there are communities like some Andamanese groups who number even less than hundred each. There is a lot of variation in size even within the tribal groups who lie in between these two categories- somewhere from between less than 1000 to less than a million. Tribal groups can continue to occupy a geographical region even though they may go through a spell of lack of resources. In Kalahandi in Orissa for example, tribal groups have frequently suffered starvation as per reports dating back to the 1980s (Das et al., undated). Tribes often migrate when food is scarce to neighbouring places within their respective regions; long distance migration is rare and tribal groups usually travel shorter distances.

Tribal groups are also hampered by legislations that aim to prevent them exploiting forest produce whereas a proper legal regime is necessary that can judiciously address their extraction of forest resources such as hunting and collecting firewood. The issue of encouraging settled agriculture among many tribal groups by the clearing of forest lands was addressed by the Forest Rights Act, 2006 but the attempts were stalled by conservationists and the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Given that tribal groups claim certain regions as their historical residences, not being able to practice agriculture properly along with other agriculturalists might shift regional balances given the territoriality of tribes.

This territoriality of tribal groups is at the crux of most political manoeuvres made by tribal groups. An understanding of the geographical patterns of land occupation by tribal groups can help in studying their political mobilizations. This understanding can also help in finding solutions to many problems faced by tribal groups such as hunger and deprivation, land alienation, food gathering practices or the method of cultivation, economic or developmental backwardness and policy interaction since many of the claims by tribal groups are based on some notion of territoriality or its management.

Other than influencing the territorial politics of tribal groups the geographical distribution of tribes in India can also have other antecedent effects. The most obvious and direct consequence of geographical location can be the tribal practice of food gathering and the exact place of residence in a region based on access to resources. Tribal groups living in coastal areas such as the Nicobar Islands for example practice subsistence fishing as a livelihood (Ravikumar et al., 2016). Another example is of the Lepchas of Sikkim who practice terrace cultivation in the hilly regions they occupy.

The nature of soil and climate can also play a part in influencing the crops sown by tribal groups and many a time unique crops and dishes can be found among tribal groups. The geographical distribution of tribes in India can also influence the herbal remedies developed by the tribal groups which can sometimes be of immense value to modern medicine. Many Himalayan plants, for example, are utilized by the local tribal populations in preparing home remedies some of which also hold value for modern medicine.

Another prominent impact of the geographical distribution of tribes in India is its impact on the hunger of tribal groups. For tribes living near **protected forests** for example, preventing them from extracting forest resources can push them towards subsistence agriculture, which might not leave much for the entire population in the community. Many individuals might then suffer from chronic hunger because of insufficient supply of food for all.

The geographical location of tribes in India can also influence land alienation. For example, the tribal groups living near rich mineral resources such as by the Chota Nagpur Plateau might get displaced due to development projects. Such events can activate the territorial politics of tribal groups and lead to conflict in some cases. The geographical distribution of tribes in India can also influence their economic or developmental backwardness. This can chiefly occur when tribal groups are separated from their needed resources. Being resource

impoverished, they may turn to other modes of livelihood for which they may not be adequately trained. Also, many may find it difficult to adapt to work processes to participate in the modern economy.

The geographical location of tribes in India can also, for instance, influence the policy interaction of tribal communities. Geographical locations might witness high, moderate or low levels of economic, social or institutional development. This can have a bearing on policy interaction of tribal communities with the government. Policy can also influence the peculiar characteristics of tribes in the sense that many tribes dependent on fishing might be placed at a disadvantage when policies favouring new fishing technologies come about. Many policies might also be addressed to particular tribal groups such as for the Jarawa in the Andmans who are largely protected by government policies due to their identification as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) and in part due to their isolated geographical location in the Andaman Islands.

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