UNIT 7 : TRIBES IN INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Tribe: Definition and Meaning

7.4 Characteristics

- 7.4.1 T.B. Naik's Characterisation of Tribe
- 7.4.2 Anthropological Convention
- 7.4.3 Constitution of India and Scheduled Tribes
- 7.4.4 Common Characteristics

7.5 Classification and Distribution of Tribes

7.6 British Policy towards the Tribes

7.7 Policy during the Post-Independence Period

7.8 Let Us Sum Up

7.9 Further Reading

7.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

7.11 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to :

- define tribes
- indentify the characteristics of tribes
- discuss the distribution and classification of tribes in India
- describe the British policy towards the tribes
- discuss the State policy of the post-Independent India.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Indian society is a collection of various societies of heterogeneous communities. Social norms, customs and role behaviour of these

communities are not always similar and vary from community to community. They vary according to their religion - some follow Hinduism, some Islamism some of them are Sikhs, while some others are Christian, etc. They also vary in their ways of life - in the norms and rules that they follow. While some are simple societies, others are complex ones. Caste society is a complex society, while tribal society is a simple society. Societies can also be studied depending on language they use and also depending on their location, such as rural society and urban society. In rural areas, we find both caste and tribal societies, while in urban areas various communities live in urban ways without following much of their traditional norms and customs.

In this unit, we will study the various characteristics of tribal societies in India. When we say tribal people, we indicate that stock of population which have been living in various locations since time immemorial. They are also called indigenous people.

7.3 TRIBE: DEFINITION AND MEANING

The **Oxford Dictionary** has defined tribe as a *"*group of people in a primitive or barbarious stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor."

D.N Majumdar defines tribe as a social group with territorial affiliation, endogamous, with no specialisation of functions, ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, united in language or dialect, recognizing social distance with other tribes or castes.

According to **Ralph Linton**, tribe is a group of bands occupying a contiguous territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in a culture, frequent contacts and a certain community of interests.

L.M Lewis believes that 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, a religion and world view of corresponding dimensions. Characteristically too, tribal languages are unwritten and hence the extent of communication both in time and space is inevitably narrow. At

the same time, tribal societies exhibit a remarkable economy of design and have a compactness and self-sufficiency lacking in modern society.

Prof S.C.Sinha has defined the defined tribe as "essentially pre-literate groups, living in relative isolation in hills and forests or in the plains skirting the forests, apparently outside the threshold of Brahmanic Hierarchic civilization."

7.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF TRIBE

7.4.1 T.B. Naik's Characterisation of Tribe

T.B Naik has given the following features of tribes in Indian context:-

- A tribe should have least *functional interdependence* within the community.
- It should be economically backward (i.e. *primitive means of exploiting natural resources).* Tribal economy should be at an underdeveloped stage and it should have multifarious economic pursuits.
- There should be a *comparative geographical isolation* of its people.
- They should have a *common dialect*.
- Tribes should be *politically organized and community panchayat should be influential.*
- A tribe should have *customary laws.*

Naik argues that, for a community to be a tribe it should possess all the above mentioned characteristics, and a very high level of acculturation with outside society debars it from being a tribe. This term usually denotes *a social group bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory*.

It is true that some of the characteristics as mentioned by Naik are prevalent among the tribes - but not all of these factors are always present. Similar is the case with Bailey's (1957) definition, or Sahlin's (1968) segmentary definition of tribe which cannot comprehensively describe a tribe.

Andre Beteille in his essay on *'Tribe and Peasants'* analysed various definitions of "Tribe", and concluded "*There is thus no one way of defining a tribal society. Definitions may be either very broad and loose or very narrow and restricted. The former would apply not only to the tribes but in many ways also to the peasantry. The latter would exclude many societies which have been conventionally regarded as tribal."*

Ghurye (1963:19-20) is one of the earliest writers who examined the characteristics of tribes in his famous book "*The Scheduled Tribes"*. His basic contention is that, tribes cannot be called the aboriginal as we have no proof that they are the original inhabitants of India. He describes the tribal people as the imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society and can be termed backward Hindus. Ghurye's contention was not based on any intensive studies of the tribal people of India, and, herefore, has no acceptability at least not in the present case.

7.4.2 Anthropological Convention

Another closest definition of tribe could be the one as treated by the Anthropological Convention (Beteille, 1987: 78). For them, the tribe as a whole is completely an organised society. Such a society is characterised by:

- A *self perpetuating system* having within its boundaries all the *resources necessary* for the continued maintenance of a particular mode of collective existence.
- It is a *whole culture.*
- Each tribe has its *own territory* to signify that they are politically autonomous.
- It also has its *own language or dialect* to mark the *distinctiveness of its culture.*

7.4.3 Constitution of India and Scheduled Tribes

The Constitution of India which specifies certain tribes as Scheduled tribes also has not provided any *criteria* or definition for considering a community as a tribe under the list of Scheduled Tribe. However, the *criteria* adopted for specifying communities as Scheduled Tribe are as follows :

- *traditional occupation* of a definite geographical area,
- *distinctive culture* which includes whole spectrum of the tribal way of life, i.e. language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts and crafts, etc.,
- *primitive traits* depicting occupational pattern, economy, etc and
- *lack of educational and economic development* (Verma, 1990: 11).

7.4. 4 Common Characteristics

From the above discussion, it would not be difficult to identify the common characteristics of tribes. Some of such characteristics are noted below:

- Each *tribe has a name* through which they identify themselves.
- Each tribe has its *own territory* to signify that they are *politically autonomous.*
- Tribes should be *politically organized* and *community panchayat* should be influential.
- It also has its *own language or dialect* to mark the *distinctiveness of its culture*.
- Each has it *prescribed pattern of behaviour and norms*.
- They have their *own rituals and festivals*.
- They are usually *endogamous.*

There are other minor characteristics such as :

- Most of the tribal languages *do not have scripts*.
- Each tribe *claims their descent from a common ancestor* which may be real or mythical.
- Tribal people *do not easily adapt to a changing situation*.

- They believe in taboos which are usually certain forbidden things or *restrictions, generally communicated verbally, but have the force of law.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

Q1 : State whether the following are true or false:

a) The definition of tribe given by the Anthropological Convention characterises a tribe as a self perpetuating system.

.....

.....

b) One of the most common characteristic of tribe is its ack of own language and dialect.

.....

.....

c) Lack of education and economic development is a criterion for specifying communities as Scheduled Tribes.

.....

.....

7.5 CLASSIFICATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF TRIBES

Tribes in India have been classified variously. Among these, the classifications of Guha, Dube, Roy Burman, and Bhowmick's are popular. In his book *Tribal India* 1971, Bhowmick classified Indian tribes on the basis of –

- geographical distribution
- linguistic distribution
- physical features and racial affinities
- economy

We will discuss the geographical distribution as follows:

- **GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION**

Different anthropologists have made various geographical groupings of the tribes. **Guha's classification** shows three broad divisions, namely,

- North and North-Eastern area in the mountain valleys of eastern frontiers of India,
- Peninsular India and Indo Gangetic Plain, and
- Southern zone.

The most recent classification that we have is of **L.P. Vidyarthi's classification** who divided the tribes according to the five distinct physical zones of India, namely,

- Himalayan region
- Middle India region
- Western India Region
- South India region and
- The Island region

Let us now discuss L.P Vidyarthi's classification of India's tribes.

- **HIMALAYAN REGION:** Himalayan region has been divided into three sub-regions i.e.
  - Northeastern Himalayan region,
  - Central Himalayan region and
  - North western Himalayan region.
  - **North-Eastern Himalayan region** comprises of the seven states of the north eastern region of India and the mountainous region of North Bengal. The prominent tribes inhabiting the region are Bodo, Khasi, Garo, Mishing, Abor, Naga, Meitei, Karbi, Mizo, Chakma, etc.
  - **Central Himalayan region** comprises of the Tarai area of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The dominant tribes in this region are Santhal. Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Lohara, etc.
  - Within the **North-Western Himalayan region** fall the States like Himachal Pradesh. Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir. The prominent tribes of this region are Gaddi, Gujjar, Pangwal, Kinnaur or Kinner, Lahaula, Laddakhi, Bakarwal, Brokpa, Changpa, Balti, Dogra, etc.

- **MIDDLE INDIA REGION**: This region comprises of the highest number of tribal population in the country. The region covers the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orrisa Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand. The Oraon, Santhal, and Gonds are some of the important tribes of this region.
- **WESTERN INDIA REGION** : This region includes Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharastra, Goa and Dadra and Nagar Haveli having a tribal population of around 98.86 lakh. Gujjar, Bhil, Meena are some of the tribes of this region.
- **SOUTH INDIA REGION** : The remaining portion of the peninsular India i.e. Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala comprise this zone. Tribal population in this region is scanty. The Arandan, Kadar, Irula, Kota, Palliyan, Toda are some of the tribes of this region.
- **ISLAND REGION** : In this region fall the Anadaman and Nikobar Island, and the Lakswadweep Islands. Jarwa, Onges, Andamanese, etc. are some of the tribes from this region.

Population-wise, the Gonds are found to be highest in number followed by the Bhils. Given below is a list of the tribes having the highest and the lowest population in India. The population figures are approximates:

- **TRIBES WITH THE HIGHEST POPULATION**

Gonds	-	8 lakhs
Bhils	-	7.5 lakhs
Santhal	-	5 lakhs
Mina	-	2.2 lakhs
Oraon	-	2 lakhs

- **TRIBES WITH THE LEAST POPULATION**

Jarwa	-	50
Onges	-	100
Andamanese	-	150
Arandan	-	250

7.6 BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS THE TRIBES

There was no uniform British policy towards tribal people. But the common policy they adopted was to **isolate these people from the mainstream societies.** They considered them savages, and therefore, they gradually attempted to "tame" the tribal people by armed measures **and thereafter to "civilise them**" by education and widen the scope and scale of their acculturation with "civilised" people in the neighbouring tracts.

The British Government faced various tribal uprisings right from 1831. In this year the Kol mutiny in the province of Chota Nagpur occurred against the British. The British Government placed an agent to the Governor General in charge of the province. Then there was the Santhal rebellion in 1855 taking into account of the land assessment. In both the cases, the British had changed the administrative system and also the legislation dealing with land.

Through the **Government of India Act 1870**, the Parliament conferred upon the Governor General-in-Council the power to approve sanction as law and regulation made by the local and provincial governments, for the administration of certain special areas (to which earlier the Secretary of State council had applied the Act). Many measures were taken under this Act. In **1874** the Indian legislature passed the **Scheduled District Act**, whereby, the local government was empowered to declare in respect of the tracts specified in the Act what enactments were or were not in force and to notify the application with modifications or restriction if necessary.

The main purpose of the British policy was to secure peace and not necessarily to help the people to advance on the road to progress, either by integration to plains people or otherwise. The **forest policy** as followed by the British also was not fundamentally different. Gradually, in these areas, survey and settlement was carried out and land revenue imposed wherever and whenever possible. In **1876**, the government banned the sale of land in Santhal Parganas, either privately or by order of Court.

The **reforms suggested by Montague and Lord Chelmsford** in their report also admitted the existence of certain backward areas in the provinces where the people being primitive, there was no material on which to found political institution. Their suggestion that the backward tracts should be administered by the head of the province was however not carried out.

The **Government of India Act 1919**, under section 52 A (2) empowered the Governor General-in-Council to declare any territory to be backward tract with the sanction of the Secretary of the State. Accordingly, the Government declared several areas, more or less same as the scheduled areas, as backward tracts. This was not the end and administrative reforms continued. In 1936, under the **Government of India Act 1935**, these areas were re-designated as "excluded areas" and "partially excluded areas" with certain modifications.

7.7 POLICY DURING THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

- **Policy during the post independence period**: **Issues of Integration and autonomy:**

In the post independence period, the problems of the tribes have been analysed from various viewpoints. The British policy of isolation and the theoretical prescription for the complete assimilation have been negated by the policy makers and in its place accepted a policy of integration. This policy of integration suggests that tribes should neither be converted to zones nor should they be forced to assimilate to the wider society, rather, they should be brought to the national mainstream through a gradual process of intermingling. This approach of gradual integration and retention of tribal culture insists on care and caution in planning for the tribes.

➢ **POLITICAL AUTONOMY**

The Constitution of India has provided legal safeguards to the millions of tribes living in different parts of the country. The Fifth and Sixth schedule of the Constitution provides autonomy to the tribes for their all-round upliftment. Using these provisions, many States have constituted

Autonomous District Councils in the tribal dominated districts / areas for self-rule of the tribes in the respective regions. In Assam, the North Cachar Hills District Council, the Karbi Anglong District Council, and the Bodoland Territorial Council were created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

➢ **PANCHSHEEL**

Nehru initiated the framing of policy guidelines under the panchsheel principle as an integrational approach. The Panchsheel guidelines are as follows :

- The tribal people should be allowed to develop along the lines of their own genius, and we should avoid imposing anything on them.
- Their rights on land and forests should be respected.
- They should be trained to build up their own people so that they can look after their own administration and development.
- They should not be over-administered, and should not impose on them multiplicity of schemes.
- We should judge results not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

For the development of the tribal areas, the Government of India had set up **43 sub multipurpose tribal blocks** in 1953 in thevarious States of India. Between 1960 and 1969 several committees were set up to examine the working of these blocks and the problems of the tribes.

For the economic development of the tribal areas, the **tribal sub-plan** was created giving a flow of fund from the main Five Year plans, since 1974 during the Fifth Five Year plan. It is still continuing. Various types of developmental schemes have been adopted.

Despite having taken such steps, the condition of the tribes has not improved substantially. Even, the Constitutional provisions coupled with various Central and State Acts have not been able to do justice to these people. The tribal people were faced with issues concerning the lower Human Development Index, poor infrastructure, diminishing control over the natural resource base, persistent threats of eviction from their habitat, exclusion from mainstream society and economy, poor distribution of wealth and opportunities, and non-empowerment. In order to address these issues,

and to place the Scheduled Tribes on a progressive and constructive path, and to make them active partners in nation building, the government of India has decided to frame a **National Policy for the Scheduled Tribes**. This seeks to facilitate the translation of the Constitutional safeguards into reality, with simultaneous socio-economic development. A draft Policy has already been circulated and is being adopted soon.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

Q2 : Fill in the blanks:

a) The _____tribe have the highest population among the tribal people in India.

b) The least population among the tribes are of the _____

c) The tribes of Assam belong to the _____ region.

d) The tribal autonomous district councils in Assam have been formed in accordance to the _____ Schedule of the Constitution of India.

e) The man behind the framing of the Panchsheel has been _____



7.8 LET US SUM UP

- We have discussed the various definitions of tribe given by several anthropologists.
- Based on the analysis of the characteristic features of tribal society forwarded by Naik, the critiques by Andre Beteille and Ghurye, the list of characteristics forwarded by the Anthropological Convention, and the criteria adopted by the Constitution of India for specifying Scheduled Tribes, we have summed up the common characteristics of tribe, especially in the Indian context.

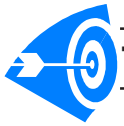
- The major characteristics include political autonomy and own territory, a politically organised community, having their own dialect, customs, norms and festivals, and the practice of endogamy, all of which make their culture distinct.
- We also focused on the geographical distribution of the various tribes of India and mentioned the several criteria on the basis of which anthropologists have classified the tribes of India.
- The policy towards the tribal people adopted and followed by the government of India, during pre-independent and post-independent India have been discussed.
- At present, the focus is to empower the tribal communities so that they can decide and work on their future. The role of the government is as a facilitator.
- The Indian Constitution is dedicated to the welfare and empowerment of the tribal people of India. Several schemes have been adopted and funds provided for the empowerment of the tribal people of India. The Government of India is working on a National Policy for the Scheduled tribes to realise the goals of the Constitution of India.



7.9 FURTHER READING

1) L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai *'The Tribal Culture of India'*, Concept, Delhi

Nadeem Hasnain *Tribal India,* Palaka Prakashan, Delhi



7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q No.1: a) True b) False c) True

Answer to Q No. 2: a) Gond b) Jarwa c) North-Eastern Himalayan d) Sixth e) Jawaharlal Nehru.