

Contested Identities: Tribes as ‘others’ in Odisha

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Abstract: This paper talks about the long contested relationship between the tribes and the dominant Hindu upper caste sections. This article reviews the journey of this concept by dealing with the major arguments given by scholars in tribal studies and at the same time, it deals with the modern-primitive debate the gets associated with the tribes. This paper explores the construction of tribes as others in the case of Odisha. It further investigates the state of tribes in the context of massive development induced displacement in the present scenario.

Keywords: Tribes, Others, modern, primitive, Indigenous people, Identity

The ‘Modern’-‘Primitive’ Dilemma

Various terms have been used to describe the tribes, such as ‘Adivasis’, ‘aborigines’, ‘indigenous people’, ‘vanavasis’, ‘barbarians’, ‘savages’, the ‘primitives’, and of course the ‘Scheduled Tribes’, the latter being a colonial designation. The tribes have been described as the ‘primitive’ or ‘brabarians’ or ‘savage’ all over the globe. But again, the very notion of the primitive is a colonial construct. The term tribe has been used to refer to a group of people claiming a common descent. Xaxa says it has yet another meaning apart from the former, which pertains to people living in primitive or barbarous conditions. They were seen as a particular stage and type of society. In 18th century, the terms tribe and caste were used interchangeably. Xaxa says it was obvious in Herbert Risley’s work *Caste and Tribe*. He points out that in the 1881 Census, they were called *forest tribes*. Risley and Gait who were in charge of 1901 and 19011 censuses respectively, used the term ‘so-called animists’. Thus, for the first time tribes were defined as those who practiced ‘animism’. Gradually in subsequent censuses, the term ‘animism’ was replaced with tribal religion. A tribal society was perceived as one that lacks the traits of modernity. Tribes have often been referred to as ‘indigenous’ people. Xaxa defines the indigenous people as those who lived in the given territory long before colonization or conquest took place by a group from another geographical territory. Secondly, these are the people who became marginalized after colonization. Third, such people lead their lives in accordance with their own cultural and institutional practices rather than the law of the land. *Adivasi* is the term used in various Indian languages for indigenous people. Other terms such as autochthonous have also been used to refer to the tribes. Ghurye found the term

‘adivasi’ problematic. He preferred the term ‘aborigines’. He writes,

When the history of internal movements of peoples is not known, it is utterly unscientific to regard some tribe or the other as the original owner of the soil. It is possible to contend that even if the tribes are not aborigines of the exact area they now occupy, they are the autochthonous of India and to that extent they may be called the aborigines. (Ghurye cited in Xaxa 1999: 3590)

Ghurye wrote in 1943, the ‘aborigines’, so-called and their future, which was republished in 1959 as the *Scheduled Tribes*. He believed that the creation of “excluded and partially excluded tribal areas” were a strategy of divide and rule taken up by the colonial rulers. (Upadhyay 2010: 216) He was critical of the colonial ethnographers who treated the Indian tribes as culturally distinct from the Indian tribes. He outrightly rejected Elwin’s idea of isolation of tribes. Elwin’s criticism sprang from the closing pages of the *Baiga*, where he suggested for a National Park where the tribes would enjoy all kinds of freedom, and non-tribals would be prohibited entry. The term national park aroused criticism alleging Elwin’s desire to keep the tribes in a zoo. To this Elwin wrote:

For what is the meaning of putting an animal in the Zoo? You take it away from its home, you deprive it of its freedom, and you rob it of its natural diet and normal existence. But my whole life has been devoted to fighting for the freedom of the aboriginals, to restore to them their ancestral jungle and mountain country which is their home and to enable them to live their own lives, to have their own diet, and to refresh themselves with their

traditional recreations. (Elwin cited in Guha 2005:156)

Elwin believed the tribes have a distinct social system, and they need protection from aggressive outsiders. He preferred to call himself a protectionist rather than an isolationist. But for Ghurye, the tribes were "imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society" or 'Backward Hindus' " (Ghurye 1959: 19) He always believed that the basis of Indian civilization was the slow assimilation of the non-Aryan stock to Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system. The improper assimilation of certain groups has been mistakenly labeled by the colonial administrators as the tribes. Unlike Elwin, he promoted integration of the tribes into the mainstream Hindu society.

Another important aspect of the concept of indigenous is the idea of marginalization, domination and subjugation. This is the reason why Dravidian linguistic groups were never designated as indigenous enough though they occupied the territory what constitutes India today prior to the coming of the Aryans. Therefore, tribes in India are considered to be the indigenous people. In this context, Pathy writes that prior to the arrival of the British, no group were subjugated, therefore, the idea of indigenous can only appear during that period of time (Pathy 1992).

Here, we are well aware of the studies that talks about the modern elements present in the tribal society when it comes to Gender roles, and the self-sufficiency of their economy. Elwin wrote about tribal women while comparing them to the caste-Hindu woman:

The woman holds a high and honourable place. She goes proudly about the countryside...She is not subjected to early child-bearing; she is married when she is mature, and if her marriage is a failure (which it seldom is) she has the right to divorce. The lamentable restrictions of widowhood do not await her: should her husband die, she is allowed, even enjoined, to remarry: and in many tribes she may inherit property. Her free and open life fills her mind with poetry and sharpens her tongue with wit. (Elwin cited in Guha 1999: 18-19)

The question under contestation is not to decipher the degree of modernity that has appeared in Tribal societies. Modernity is always contextual. Here, I am making an attempt to understand the perception of non-tribal Oriya people on the tribal society vis-a-viz modernity. The popular perception of tribal society is different. The tribal are called 'aborigines', 'adivasis', 'girijans' by different scholars. Such terminologies underscore the idea of 'primitive' associated with the tribal society. The notion on tribes across the globe has been constructed as 'primitive people'. Early

evolutionists like Morgan and Taylor have talked about the evolution of human society through different stages starting from *savagery*, *barbarism* and *civilization*. The idea of the 'primitive' can never be juxtaposed with 'civilization'. The word 'jungle' has been used to describe tribal people-untouched by civilization. The Primitive and civilization are two polarities.

The idea of primitive always holds a subservient position to Civilization in the power dynamics. Civilization is more akin to modernity. And modernity is about superior technology and sharper knowledge, complex yet organized institutions. It can be justified through Foucault's idea of knowledge is power.

When it comes to asserting a modern Oriya identity, the process of identity construction appeared difficult. In order to construct a modern Oriya identity, it had cultural and political others like the Bengalis and the Telegus. At one end, they could perceive the westernized educated Bengali Bhadrak to be a counter-other who gave them a deep sense of insecurity. The Bengali Bhadrak could be 'counter-othered' by asserting a modernized identity. But what concerned it most was the presence of tribal, the internal 'others' that threatened the very idea of being 'modern' to the high caste Oriya intelligentsia. Thus, the huge mass of tribal population in the proposed province of Orissa appeared problematic. The tribes proved to be an 'other' for the non-tribal high caste Oriya community. The usual textbook definition of a tribe points out the following characteristics. The tribes have been defined "as a group of people who can be identified as a homogeneous unit with certain common characteristics. The common characteristics that they share are a common territory, a common language and descent from a common ancestor." (Kuppuswamy 1984:194) The problem with such definitions is that they perceive the tribes as a monolithic community. That every tribe has its own characteristics features, they have their own unique cultural form, and this fact has always been underestimated by social scientists. They have always been perceived as belonging to one single community. Thus, the 'othering' for all the tribes originates from this perception irrespective of their cultural practices. There were many strong grounds that gave them a basis for 'othering.' Their criterion for 'othering' was based on certain features. In the next section, I have dealt with idea of the tribes being constructed as an 'other'.

Construction of the Tribes as 'Others'

It must be noted that spatiality has a significant role in categorizing the 'others'. The spatial form of 'othering' has various forms. First is language, for instance, in ancient Greece, the dichotomy between the 'self' and the 'other' came in the form of Greek-speakers and Barbarians (Staszack 2008). Barbarians were the people who did not speak

Greek. First, they did not speak Oriya. It can be said there was an 'othering' on the basis of language. Recently, Santali tribe has acquired the place in the eighth schedule of the constitution. None of the other tribes have a written script. Second, as mentioned earlier, religion has always created a dividing line between the US/Others.

Language in many cases got replaced by religion with the advent of Christianity and Islam, the shift in the form of 'other' came in the dichotomous category of Believers and Non-believers. The tribes followed some form of primitive religion like animism. The second form of otherness is seen between the civilized and the savages. The Civilized are seen in central locations whereas savages are found in faraway zones. For the tribals of Orissa, they occupied the inaccessible forest covers and the hilly regions. The non-tribals mostly inhabited the coastal regions. And the third form of otherness is constructed on the basis of race, where the continents of the world have been divided on the basis of skin colour. Each shades of skin have a corresponding continent.

Even though 22% of the total population of the Orissa comprise of tribes, there is hardly any representation of the tribes in mainstream media. Othering has taken many forms. 'Othering' for a particular community is represented through two ways. Firstly, by its conspicuous absence from mainstream media, the tribes of Orissa are invisible in popular culture. It must be noted that till date Oriya literature has not witnessed any tribal mainstream writer. The worldview of the tribes has not yet been accounted for. In the present context literature, we don't have any tribal poet or novelist. Neither there is any representation of tribal life in any form of media.

It so happened that for the Oriya community, the large number of different tribal groups appeared disturbing while asserting a modern identity for them. The entire population of Orissa could be divided into tribal and non-tribal groups. And when it came to asserting a modern Oriya identity, its always important to project a golden past in order to weave an Oriya nationalism, which again is a form of social engineering. Its tribal connection seemed problematic. But they could not have neglected it keeping in mind the vast geographical area that was inhabited by the different tribes of Orissa. This would have provided geographical contiguity for the proposed design of Orissa. Without amalgamating the tribal tracts to this design which would help them recreate nostalgia for the golden past, the dream for a unified historical past of the Oriya speaking tracts would not have been completed. Thus, it was important to put the tribal and the non-tribal into one single Oriya community, even if the tribal were not Oriya speaking. At that point of time, it could be seen that the Oriya community constituted two

groups- the elites, which comprised the high caste Oriyas and the 'others', the primitive tribes.

The Politics of Development and Tribal rights in Independent India

Orissa has a history of displacement. The National register of large Dams, Orissa has as many as 149 large dams. Twelve are major dams, and eight out of them are in tribal regions. (Fernandes 1996) The experience of rehabilitation started quite early in Orissa, immediately after India attained independence. According to the Government of India report, 1968, 22,144 families were affected owing to displacement, and out of which 18.34% belonged to the tribal community, which makes it around 1636 tribal families. (Mishra 2002). It must be noted that the Government of Orissa announced its rehabilitation policy in 1946. But studies have pointed out that the total number of households resettled were just 11% of the total number households displaced. (Ibid). Since independence, Orissa has housed numerous manufacturing industries.

Coming to the present context, one can see juxtapositioning of development, Naxal uprising and violation of tribal rights. Land reforms were introduced in India for bringing equality and social justice to the weaker sections of the society. In spite of constitutional provisions, one can see tribals suffering from land alienation which continues to impoverish them. (Ambagudia 2010). Today, Orissa seems to have attracted multinational companies like TATA, POSCO, Vedanta, Utkal etc. The state calls it an opportunity to generate revenue and employment for the tribal inhabitants of the area. Orissa has a history of alienating the tribal of their natural rights. As soon as India attained independence, people were displaced for the proposed construction of Hirakud dam which again went hand in hand with the ideology of industrialization and rapid growth. In 1950s-1960s, INDAL, built an aluminum smelter at Hirakud. It obtained hydropower and water from the Hirakud dam near Sambalpur, which displaced around 11 lakh sixty thousand people, and more than 50% of them were tribal. In 1980, Nalco was set up at Koraput district, which again called for Kolab dam, which displaces around 3000 and 14,000 people respectively, and mostly they were adivasis. The Upper- Indravati project has seven dams, which has displaced about 40,000 people. The compensation was fixed at 14,000 per acre which has not yet been paid. When a mass movement started in April, 1992, police went for a mass arrest. The Tribes of Orissa were resisting Sutkel Dam, and Polavrama, but they have already met resistance on the part of the Police. It must be noted that because of these dams tribal inhabitants have been displaced and never been properly rehabilitated. A recent news clipping says:

It is hereby notified that the district administration is taking steps to pay arrear

compensation/ subsidy to the 'Subjects' (*Praja*) displaced by Hirakud dam (Sambad 31st August, 2011).

The above notification hints at the chauvinistic attitude of the state. Since the displaced people involved marginalized groups like tribes who are poor and do not have the proper mechanism to voice their grievances, the state remains apathetic to their problems. It is taking steps in the year 2011 for rehabilitation of the people who were displaced in 1950. Besides, it must be noted that the notification addresses the displaced people as 'subjects' not citizens.

Apart from big dams, aluminum and bauxite companies have become a matter of deep concern for the tribal of the area. Orissa has already signed MoU with 89 companies in different sectors which inter alia covers Steel (50), Aluminum (3), Power (30), Cement (3), Auto Component (1), Oil refinery (1) and Titanium dioxide (1) plant with an investment of Rs. 4,61,182.74 crores. Out of the 50 Steel Companies who's MoUs are in force, 30 Companies have commenced partial commercial production. Besides, one Aluminum, one Auto Ancillary and one Cement Industry have also commenced partial commercial production. Today Orissa comes in national news and small villages like Kashipur, Kalinganagar, Niyamgiri. Kashipur caught the limelight in 1981 for starvation deaths. It has 70% of Tribal population, rest 20% were Harijans. Around 75-80% are wage labourers. Today Kashipur is once again in limelight as 3 mega projects like Utkal Alumina, Larsen and Turbo and Hindalco have opened their plants. On 16th december, 2000, police opened fire on a gathering of adivasis opposed to Utkal at Maikanch village. Of late Odisha, has witnessed several resistance movements against Development Projects taken up by corporate like TATA, Vedanta, POSCO, Utkal, JINDAL, Rohit etc. Such voices were heard earlier when mass displacement

took up during the 1950s due to the construction of the multipurpose dam, Hirakud. These are often termed as environmental movements against industrialization in Odisha. These resistances have been termed as a part of Naxalite movement. Though traditionally, naxalism was looked into the issue of agrarian reforms, exploitation of the landless poor in a feudal set up. In today's times, displacement caused by development related projects, loss of livelihood of the tribes, and other marginalized sections of people has been the major issues. These resistances are projected by the media as blurring the gap between ecological, tribal and Naxalite movement. In the next section, I would take up different resistance movements taking place at different parts of Orissa. Here I have examined elaborately the different people's movement against displacement, and which majorly involves the tribes of Orissa, like the tribal protests at the Niyamgiri hills, the Kashipur incident, the case of Kalinga Nagar, and movement at Narayanpatna.

In the present context, the on-going people's movement in various parts of Orissa hints at the marginalized oppressed state of affair of the tribes. As globalization has made its inroads into Orissa, it must be noted that various multi-national companies have invested in Orissa for its rich mineral resources. This has led to massive displacement of tribes all over the state. That the state is unresponsive to the needs of tribe, and the media is mute on these aspects. Rather the media in Orissa which is controlled by politicians and capitalists is unsympathetic to their problems. Though there are 62 tribal communities in Orissa, with each community having a different language, distinct practices and culture, one can see a new form of alternative identity is in the making in the margins of Orissa. There is a new form of an emergent tribal identity. Here tribal identity does not mean a cultural one; it has attained a new political identity as tribes.

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