

A Discourse on Tribal Identity in Indian History

Dr. Vulli Dhanaraju

Assistant Professor, Department of History
Assam University (Central University), Diphu Campus
Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam

&

Dr. R.K Bijeta

Assistant Professor, Department of History
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU)
Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the tribal identity formation in India from historical perspective. It is argued that understanding of contemporary tribal identities requires a basic appreciation of the historical processes that have been determined the course of successive changes in socio-cultural, economic, ideological and political life of the tribes. Keeping in view of the Indian sub-continent, one can only generalize that the historical experiences would be as variable for different people as their interaction with their ecology and the neighboring cultures from time to time. In this context this paper assesses the changing discourse tribal identity formation in Indian history by exploring various historiographies.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Colonialism, Tribe, Ethnography

Introduction:

Defining the concept of tribe in such a manner in India is still continuing due to the fact that very few studies have developed this issue, rather most of the scholastic studies on tribal themes are associated with tribal welfare. In this respect, Andre Beteille argues that anthropologists in India both before and after independence have been concerned more with the practical problems of definition.¹ Thus many scholars have referred to tribe as a type of society representing stage in social evolution, signifying a set of characteristic features and specific mode of social organization.² They have explained four major sequential stages of evolution from 'band' to tribe to 'chiefdom' to the state.³ Later on, some of them have denied of the existence of any difference between tribe and chiefdoms, band and tribes, who however, do not reveal a meaningful direction.⁴

The logic of defining 'tribe' is easily understood if it is linked to the debates of Constituent Assembly where Jaipal Singh a member favoured the use of the term *Adivasi* instead of 'Scheduled Tribe'. This was rejected on the ground as argued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution that the word *Adivasi* is really a general term, which has no specific *legal de jure* connotations. He argued that the term 'Scheduled Tribe' has a fixed meaning because it enumerates the tribes.⁵ Another dimension of the term tribe is that in spite of various definitions and designations given to it, during last two decades, anthropologists and others have come across of a new term, that is 'indigenous people' which also conceptually challenges the earlier meaning of the term for tribe. The term 'indigenous people' to a large extent are similar to that of the term 'native' used during the colonial period. Since the distinctions of physical, racial traits and religion do not show many differences as compared to the non-tribal population the question of habitat, language and dialect have been regarded as the basis of tribal identity. However,

defining of tribe is very difficult task, precisely because they have had no written records either held or written by them. Whatever writings are available, they are written by 'others', with different interests and compulsions. These are mostly divorced from the objective and subjective conditions of the tribal people.

Enumeration of Tribes in Ancient Indian History and Literature:

Identity formation must be perceived as a dynamic process that can be dealt with historical changes. There have been extensive research on the tribal identities in colonial period but very few studies have done on the pre-colonial period. Neeladri Bhattacharya has criticized them for the little interest shown by them on the pre-colonial tribal situation; he stated that, "the social lives and practices of forest dwellers and peasants, shifting cultivators and pastoralists, were crucially affected by the way they were seen by state and society, as well as the self-conceptions of their own practice. Research on the theme, limited as it is, has tended to focus on the colonial period, and arguments about dramatic changes in state attitudes have often been made on the basis of implicit unexplored assumptions about pre-colonial societies"⁶. This makes it imperative to at least take a quick look at the pre-colonial dominant constructions of the tribes. As K.S. Singh⁷ believe that though the colonialists claimed that all references to the tribes in pre-colonial India were contemptuous, it was not so. This is his quotation from *Kiratarjunetyanr*, "the Kirata King is a master of martial arts. Do not disregard him as a mountain dweller". But rather than proving the point of Singh this unfortunate quotation proves the opposite point that mountain dwellers were generally looked down upon, but the '*Kirata*' king was an exception.

Unlike Singh, Romila Thapar⁸ does not find it necessary to see the dominant culture's perception monolithically i.e. either as positive or negative. In her work, she examines the image of the barbarian in ancient India. She thinks the image draws its genesis from "the curious situation of the arrival of the Indo-Aryan-speaking nomadic pastoralists in northern India who came into contact with the indigenous population (possibly the remnants of the urban civilization of the Indus) and regarded them as barbarian". She adds that the distinction that was made with the indigenous population was a linguistic one (between the Sanskrit speakers and the non-Sanskrit speakers) and to a lesser degree, a racial one⁹.

The word that was used to describe the 'other' in Sanskrit was *mleccha*. This word did not always refer to the tribes. Its usage varied according to the circumstance and times. But we have to follow the trajectory of this word to find out what the attitudes towards the tribes were by the Aryans.

The Indian Anthropologists have been influenced by the colonial administrators, ethnographers in the writing of tribal history as H.H Risely¹⁰ has proposed the theory of Aryan invasion. It has been reflected in the writings of Indian traditional anthropologists and historians. The usual way of writing ancient Indian history of tribals in the words of Bhowmic: "At first, the Aryan invaders through the North-West Frontier of India penetrated the mainland. The early settlers who resisted them were either completely annihilated or, in compelling circumstance, some of them merged with them. The rest were pushed back into the interior jungles, to the dales and the forest side inhospitable regions of our country, where somehow they were able to preserve their own culture and traditions". However it has been vehemently criticized by the recent scholars. Jaganth Pathy¹¹ has stated in his work as it implicitly assumes that the proper history of tribal India had begun only with the Aryan invasion; firstly, prior to Aryan invasion, there was hardly anything substantive in the indigenous societies worthy of anthropological investigation. Secondly, the invaders forcibly

absorbed a part of the tribal India while the other part was pushed into the interior, which remained, more or less isolated with their pristine culture and tradition.

Thaper has rejected the theory of Aryan invasion by stating that: “the historians therefore cannot but the theory that a large number of Aryans conquered northern India, enslaving the existing population and thereby established their language and culture, both entirely alien to the indigenous tradition. It has to be conceded that, if there was a conquest, it was limited to parts of the extreme North. It is more likely that groups of Aryan speaking people migrated into northern India, and settled and mixed up with the indigenous population. This culture that resulted evolved from this interaction”. Pathy¹² has stated that the theory of Aryan invasion is still deplorable for several reasons: Firstly, it has been generally found that the capacity of hunters and gathers to fight is relatively much stronger than that of the pastoralists (Aryans). Hence one tends to be skeptical about how the Aryans conquered the hunters and gatherers. It may be mentioned that iron which could have given a better offensive capability was used only around 800 B.C., after 700 years of Aryan immigration. Secondly if the Aryans were in need of fertile lands in river banks, the primitive inhabitants had no use of such land; which normally must have been covered by dense jungles. The common habitations of the hunters and gathers have been uplands all over the world, except where such land is unavailable in the vicinity. This is precisely because their struggle against nature and their appropriation of subsistence is easier in thinner forests of the hills than those of the fertile plains. Kosambi¹³ rightly said: “primitive man would live in thinner marginal jungle, not in territory now bearing the deeper, cultivated soil; that is, the best localities for the food gatherers were approximately where they are found today”.

Aloka Parasher Sen¹⁴ has used the word to denote tribals as forest dwellers and understand how the state perceived the forest dwellers and sought to subordinate and assimilate them. Geography and the perceived existence of the hostile tribes defined the frontiers of the empire and both had to be mastered for the expansion and integration of the state. Though the Mauryan Empire was supposed to be the first centralized government in the subcontinent, Parasher Sen argues that the unconquered territories in the fringes of the empire determined the structure of the centre too. The attitude of the centre towards these fringes varied from fear to attempts at appropriation. In a quote from Kautilya, Parasher Sen proves that the jungle tribes were equated with wild animals, all of who were considered unnecessary in an ideal *janapaaa*, or settlement. The earlier Brahminical view was to avoid contact with the forest dwellers (known as *mleccha*, *atavikas*). But, Kautilya advises direct contact with them and to use them against the enemy as spies. This was supposed to keep them from looting and plundering.

By the time of the Mauryan Empire, a distinction seems to have emerged about various tribes amongst the dominant culture. Thus, Kautilya mentions *aranyacaras* and *atavikas*. The *atavikas* have connotations of a ‘wild and savage tribe well entrenched in the jungle fastness who were ostensibly a nuisance to the State’.¹⁵ The *aranyacarus* were on the other hand, tribes who were entering into some kind of negotiations with the centralized State. They were seen to be lower than the people *inhabiting janapadas* but tamed unlike the *atavikas*.

Another level of the pre-colonial construction of the tribe also betrayed some grudging respect to the jungle tribes. Thus the *atavikas* were seen to be ‘well-organized and brave, practically autonomous and fond of looting and killing’¹⁶. Yet, Romilla Thapar

believes that *mlecchas* were also incorporated in practice into the social, political and religious systems and were the progenitors of many of the essentials of Indian culture¹⁷. Once the distinction with the language was made, the territorial distinction was also made with *Arya-varta* where the correct rituals were performed, or as Parasher Sen points out, as the area where the *Dharmasastras* prevailed¹⁸. This definitely places the areas other than *Arya-varta* at a disadvantage. She also thinks that the establishment of the *Varnashrama* society also went hand in hand with these developments. Thapar says that by the second half of the first millennium B.C. that saw the extensive urbanization of the Ganges valley, the city dwellers were made to look down upon the forest and hill dwellers who were the tribes. The names of tribes mentioned during this period include Sabara, Pulinda, Mutiba and Kirata¹⁹. By now it included groups ranked as mixed castes, technologically backward tribes and communities along the frontiers as well as people speaking a different tongue. Later foreigners like *Yavanas* and even Arabs were included among the *mlecchas*. More than what the barbarian did, her/his exclusion was based on certain notions of ritual purity.

Even the Jains and Buddhists had pejorative terms to describe the tribes. Parasher Sen proves that it was the social organization of these societies that were supposed to place them at a barbaric level from the societies of the *janapadas*. Jain monks and nuns were warned to avoid the areas of 'unlearned and barbaric people'²⁰. As mentioned, it was the social organization of those societies that is pointed out to be the reason for their barbaric nature. The social organization not based on *varnasrama dharma* was seen to be outside civilization. This is particularly interesting because Buddhism is seen to be a religion that came to be as a questioning of the *varna* social structure.

R.S. Sharma has also discussed about the status of tribals in ancient India. It was the time when the Aryans and, at a later stages' the high caste Hindus made all efforts to have their hegemony over the tribals. He applies historical materialistic approach to the understanding of history. Explaining his approach to social formation which took place in ancient India he puts down his basic postulate²¹. "According to the hypothetical position taken by Sharma, he considers tribals of ancient India as representing class society. Class to him is a "group of people as either owns the means of production or is deprived of these. In the initial stages of social development dispossession from the fruits of production becomes a prelude to class formation."²² He rejects the anthropological proposition on the strength of historical evidence available to him that the tribal society centers on kinship organization. He argued that the axis of the tribal life revolved on mode of production. There used to be tribal chief among them to whom the tribesmen submitted whatever they procured in the forests. At his level, the chief redistributed whatever food collections he got. It was an exchange system.

Thus whatever literature shows that the tribals did not constitute the core of the society. They always remained encapsulated within the environs of hills and forests though there are no accounts of their collective ethnicity, it is stated that they practiced a pastoral life characterized by animism. Social formation in the shape of a well defined ethnic identity and a state was also absent. They were, by and large, a classless and stateless society.

Tribal State Formation in Medieval India:

The identity of the tribals in medieval India is also controversial subject as scholars perceived the tribal from the state formation perspective while others vehemently rejected this notion. There is little information available about the tribal status during medieval period. Suranjit K Saha's²³ article attempts the processes through which the early states emerged from within the mountain and forest regions of east-central India over a long period

from A.D. 450 to A.D. 1320. It finds that the classical Hindu states to the north, particularly the Gupta empire, did indeed provide the principal ideological role model for the rise of those local and regional states, but that the latter were in the main home grown political structures built by autochthonous leaders from below to upwards. These highland states also appear to have played a crucial historical role in the gradual fusion of the lineage based local societies into a subcontinent wide pan-Indian society. He argues that an adequate understanding of the current tribal situation in the micro region, and indeed in the rise of India, would require an understanding of the spatiality differentiated process of political and material development rooted deep in its history. At the core of that understanding must recognize that India's so-called mainstream society is built out of progressive coalescence intertwining of locally evolved processes and structures that India has been built from below to above.

Describing the process of state formation among the tribals of northern India during the medieval period, K. S. Singh observes,²⁴ "Following the eclipse of the Gupta Empire the wide eastern tract extending from the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhya Mountains (Kaimir range) witnessed the emergence of the rural foci of political power, led by autochthonous chieftains. Such communities as Doms, Bhars and Cheros in south Bihar, Kharwas in the Sone-Damodar Valley, Gonds and Rakshels on the Chhattisgarh region and the Bhumij on the jungle mahals of Bengal filled the vacuum in the country in the medieval period. The doms founded kingdoms at the Himalayan foothills, in the 13th century one of their princes ruled at Ayodhya. The Bhars occupied a large area extending from Bundelkhand and Sagar to the eastern districts and in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as far as Bhagalpur and Tirhut".

While discussing the process of state-formation among the tribals, Singh provides a broad based data in support of his arguement.²⁵ The process can be observed at its peak during the 13th century, during the period the aboriginals, especially mongoloid Ahoms, established their states in Upper Assam. The Chutiyas and Kacharis had their kingdoms sometimes before 13th century.²⁶ The Khasi kings had established relationship with about 15 neighbouring states in the plateau²⁷. The Gonds, a powerful group of tribal's now mostly found in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh formed states in parts of Central India.²⁸ Similarly during this period the Nagbansis and the Cheros established their principalities in the Shahbad and Palamau regions of Bihar²⁹.

In western India, the erstwhile princely state of Banswara and Dungarpur were founded by Bhil rules. The popular legends Banswara associates with the killing of a Bhil chieftain Bansia, and Kushalgarh with that the Kushala Bhil. It is believed that their head lie buried in the foundations of the palace gates. The image that arises from such legends is one of the establishments of kingdom by the Rajput chiefs in the area heavily inhabited by the tribals.³⁰

What is important is that the diverse tribals of the northern and western India which were loose collectivities characterized by varying ethnicity, having the least mark of social differentiation, got to the intensive process of state formation. The tribal chieftains' dominion over the neighbor regions in northern India could not continue for a longer period. It was because of the fact that the non-tribal Hindu elements constituted a majority and the tribal ethnicity was not acceptable to them. In course of time the Rajputs in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, established their ascendancy over the tribal hegemony and drove them to forests and hills. It was a watershed in the history of the tribals in India. A new

process of ethnic-transformation began. The tribals on one hand took to the acceptance of Rajput ethnic attributes and on the other, accepted Rajput political subjugation.

For northern Indian states, the diverse tribal groups came in direct contact with the local rulers who were in most of the cases Rajputs. Despite the heterogeneous tribal groups found in medieval India, there was no dispute to hold Gond, Santhal, and the Bhil as the numerically dominant collectivities of the country. The basic categories of the knowledge, namely, theory, method, and data, about these groups relate to the social conditioning constituted by the then historical forces. The tribal ethnicity in terms of its primordial dispositions, isolation, images, character attributes-therefore, bears the imprint of the relationship between the tribal groups on one hand and the Rajputs on the other.

One of the main factors that were an impact on both tribal identity and subsistence was the military conflict between ruling class that shows in both the Maratha and Mughal periods. The chieftain societies of different tribes like the Gonds or the Khakkars also participated in these conflicts. At the same time the tribals who were peasants or gatherers in the forests were forced to support their own chieftains and therefore formed bands in forests and formed important part of the chieftains' mercenary army. In this context it is important to remember that the term 'tribes' has been used very loosely for communities which were existed in a lineage society. In keeping with this definition many communities that were later described as peasants by the British were termed tribes by the accounts of the medieval period.

Chetan Singh's³¹ early article on the role of tribal chieftains in Mughal administration clearly identified warrior and ruling classes of indigenous kingdoms as superior tribal linkages. Amongst these were the Jats, the Kakkhars, Baluchis and Afghans in this vein, the chief feature of their society not only being their blood and kinship line of descent but also their pastoral and non-sedentary occupational characteristics.

In a later article K.S Singh is however more categorical about the mention of hunters and gatherers as primitive people. For example he writes of their references in *Akbarnama* where tribal people were described as "men who go naked living in the wilds, and subsist by their bows and arrows and the game they kill". He also argues that the medieval texts show that in case of tribals like the Gonds "that people of India despise them and regard them outside the pale of their realm and religion". Such an identification of tribals as outside the realm of the sedentary cultivation was contingent upon the development of a system of land administration which was an important characteristic of the Mughal in 16th and 17th centuries.

The Maratha rulers did not recognize the tribal chiefs as the local kingdom instead they had always conflicts with them. O Malley³² said that in 1804, a Maratha governor killed about 7000 bhils and another in 1806 'boasted that he put 15000 to death in 15 months'. Before that the British perceptions of tribes were conditioned by their own contingencies. For example the Anglo-Maratha conflicts of the 18th century led to descriptions that described the Gond chieftains as the "lords of the rugged hills" and their subjects as people who were prone to anarchic behaviour and "habitual depredations". Some of these depredations were described as "ravages of lawless tribes" who assisted the errant and "chaotic rulers".

Sumit Guha's³³ latest works shows that early British accounts in the region of Khandesh and Central India argues that the complex interrelationships between pre-colonial regimes of natural resource management, environmental changes and tribal subsistence in the

Maratha period. The resultant identity of people as tribals is then governed by the multiple contexts of survival within which these people used to live. Larger patterns of resource use and the impact of other forces on them also determined the political economy of such identities and survival systems. In the analysis of state's perspective of land it has been pointed out that even in pre-British period 'the rulers, like the Marathas, saw the forest as an obstacle: tree cover multiplies the danger from robbers, rebels and tigers'. Jungle clearance has been equated in terms of fresh revenue possibilities though it had been an arduous and difficult task.

Nandini Sinha's³⁴ work shows that for the region of Mewar similar themes have been explored. She asserts that forested and hill regions were integrated into wider imperial systems of South Asia. Moreover the panorama of economic activities in any sub-region was far more diverse than is often realized. There were no clear-cut stages or phases like hunter-gatherer, herder, settled cultivators and artisan and city dweller.

The accounts of Gonds, Santhals, and Bhils given by Haimendorf, James Tod and others for the medieval period show that the tribal groups enjoyed a lot of freedom, occupied entire tracts, and lived as the "Lords of Pass" the masters of valleys, forts, and villages and passes.

Jaganath Pathy³⁵ has summarized the nature of the state formation among the tribals. He said that interesting warfare amongst the chiefs might have given military victory to some them, who eventually established kingdoms. The subjects however neither completely belonged to single state. For instance, the kingdom of Bhils never covered all the Bhils, whereas they contained Varlis, Minas and also non-tribals in their territory. The stability of these states depended primarily on economic prosperity, and next on the military strength. No wonder therefore the early kingdoms disintegrated within a century or even within decades, and the later kingdoms pursued the policy of reclamation and extension of cultivation, development and adoption of new technology, and of extensive irrigation. In other words, their stability depended on the amount of surplus they could generate from agriculture.

The medieval 'official' argues that the tribal uprisings for the restoration of their original home state were nothing short of a rebellion. The social conditioning constituted by the history created a situation for the tribals that they had to accept the non-tribal hegemony. The Rajputs, for instance, rulers took all opportunities to suppress the tribals. On a broader perspective, the tribals of northern India, especially Bihar, central and western India had hardly begun the process of state formation.

Along with these kingdoms, there were numerous small tribal chiefdoms, spread all over the country. Several of these relied heavily on shifting cultivation. The chiefs either received a small tribute from the village or lineage headmen, in return for protection or took share in the produce. In either case, it does not appear to have constituted a serious burden for the producers. The aristocracy interfered little in the conditions of production and often exploited less their own people than the neighboring tribes. There was of course extra economic coercion, but the obligations were so diffused that it could make regulated reproduction, without ever being challenged. Simultaneously, the conquest of weaker tribes or clans yielded not only wealth but also slaves for the production process. Cutting across tribal boundaries, slavery was, in one or other form, almost universal in most of the chiefdoms. The chiefs also derived substantial wealth from the transit trade through their territory.

Colonial Construction of Tribe:

Tribal history in India is largely a product of colonial ethnography. Though the early sources for information about the tribals were the accounts of travelers, administrators and Christian missionaries, a systematic study of these people in India begins with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Anthropological studies in India until independence were confined to the study of tribes and were geared largely to the need of colonial administration, with its years of experience in governing the 'nature' and some administrators realized fairly well the importance of anthropology in all works relating to the people under their charge.

Colonial administrators produced a good amount of writings on the tribals, perhaps their writings formed one of the discursive realms in constituting the people living on the margins as 'tribe'. These writings include ethnographic notes, monographs, administrative reports, census, missionary reports and other informative reports. This is primarily meant to produce knowledge about these people, so as to enable colonial governance effective. In this sense anthropology can be said to have developed as part of the colonial administrative system. In order to implement imperialist and colonial policies they conquered and brought under their rule and the compilation of knowledge about these people was necessary. Therefore, certain anthropologists turned to be the apologists of the colonial regimes. In the beginning it was mainly the biological studies of the tribal people and also was concerned with the origin, evolution and diversity of these people. It was concerned only with a limited and restricted study and never moved beyond the study of humans. Such studies lacked the understanding and interpretation in historical perspective, but only provided data for administrative purposes.

The necessity of making census in Indian States during British era was not simply aiming at the census of population; rather it was more of documentation of the natural resources of the localities. This became useful as a wealth for making capital, which was rightly understood by British rulers. The first census report by Baine during 1891, the then Commissioner for Census of India included all tribal groups as 'Forest Tribes', and kept the same under the sub-heading of 'Agricultural and Pastoral Castes'. Their number was estimated at 16 million, who were again classified as 'Animists' or 'people following tribal religion' in the census report of 1911 by Gait; as 'Hill and Forest Tribes' in the Census Report of 1911 by Hutton. These people by that time were numbering 2 million and later on came to be known as 'Backward Tribes' in the Government of India Act 1935, and as 'Tribes' in the Census Report of 1941 accounting for a total population of 2.47 crores. Similarly, over the time the term 'tribe' in Indian context, by and large, is synonymously used as *Adivasi* (original settlers), *Girijan* (Hill dwellers), *Vanyajapt* (Forest caste), *Adimjati* (Primitive caste), *Janajat* (Folk Communities) and *Anusuchit Janajati* (Scheduled Tribe). Identification of the tribal groups through various factious names not only brought many common masses into its fold, but also imposed various new names, which the tribal people even do not know

Sumit Guha³⁶ assumes that rather than taking these communities as actually being primitive, we have to see them as having been "primitivized" in modernity. In his the book he observes that "The role that the modern regime of the forests played in isolating one segment of the population within the newly drawn boundaries of the forest is highlighted in order to make the point that the resulting primitivisation of these peoples is a recent consequence of the breakdown of their political system. It is argued that by concentrating solely on the truncated remnant of the old hierarchy, observers overlooked the living apex of

the new one, succumbed to the notion of the simple, primitive and egalitarian forest tribe, and hence failed to see the simplified, primitivized, silvicultural proletariat that it was being hammered into becoming”.

Nandini Sundar book, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-1996*, is an implicit critique on the categories of anthropology and history proceeds made initially by colonial officials, between the tribes and castes of India. Colonial officials believed that the tribes--usually communities that lived in or around forested and hilly areas--were the original inhabitants of India, and had been driven into the forests by the incursions of later communities. The tribes, by this account, were autochthonous and largely isolated groups, dependent on modes of subsistence that were primitive in comparison to the castes. They practiced animist religion distinct from that of the castes. This paper persuasively shows how even Bastar, often treated as a paradigmatic example of tribal India, resists fitting into the tribe-caste distinction. This supposedly isolated tribal area is extremely diverse linguistically and culturally; it has seen considerable in-migration over the centuries. The political and religious practices prevalent in the region were far from being outside by any "mainstream" of Indian history.

James C. Scott³⁷ has developed new argument in understanding of primitiveness among the tribals. He argues that the ‘hill Peoples’ backwardness is a political choice. Conventional narratives treat these people as backward, barbarous, primitive vestiges of a pre-civilized era. Scott argues this narrative is wrong and instead insists that "hill peoples" are, and have always been ‘barbarians’ by design. Hill peoples sought to position themselves outside the scope of state power. To avoid the state ‘hill peoples’ practice both state evasion and state prevention, which involve the adoption of a distinct set of economic, political, social and cultural practices. State evading characteristics are traits ‘that make it difficult for a state to capture or incorporate a group or appropriate its material production’. State preventing traits are ‘those that make it unlikely that a group will develop internally durable, hierarchical, state-like structures’.

Ajai Skaria³⁸ has understood the problems of marginal issues in the context of politics of construction of ideas such as jangali, tribal, primitive. He questions the notion whereby tribals were equated with ‘wild’ and ‘primitive’ and settled agriculture (under the patronage of state) with civilization. He also discussed the interdependence between state and tribal politics where revenue rights and authority were shared in a complex web of relationship. There has now been an attempt to question the notion of a uniform British policy all across India and recent researches have pointed out that there was a serious divergence of views on policies related with the forest, land and agriculture.

Thus the colonial rule’s implication in India is one of the vast historical phenomena in Indian history. The colonial rule marked a significant point especially in the tribes of different regions where they were lived under economical as well as cultural deprivation. In order to fully exploit the economic and cultural resources of the country, the British rulers introduced various institutional structures and policies in tribal belts in India. Singh argues that the entry of the colonialism into the tribal regions of India through various philanthropic strategies of the communal tribal mode of production and attributed judicial nature of the regions by way of adopting survey and hence, the emergence of the private right on land.³⁹ The very entrance of the colonial state into these areas was resisted violently by the tribals of the respective regions.

It has often been assumed that tribal people and their societies lived in insulated and secluded enclaves before the advent of the British in India. This means that their economies and culture was relatively untouched by outside markets and therefore were relatively closed, egalitarian and prosperous communities. These economies were free of exploitation because they had no private property and need rather than the profit motive necessitated their relationships of exchange. In one sense the tribal economy was characterized as being quite the opposite of peasant agriculture under the colonial rule where the peasants held individual titles to land, depended mostly on settled cultivation for their livelihoods and also sold a good part of their produce in the commercial market. But the historical evidence from many of the areas show that such a notion of the tribal economy in the anthropological writings of the 1930s was steeped in ecological romanticism.

The restrictions imposed on tribal people by the British administration through their law enforcement, had endangered the 'freedom of the natives', and forced them to question the imposition of new types of authority. Due to the imposed British policies, a segment of the new native ruling authority emerged, which exploited tribal people in various forms. Their challenges had taken the shape of insurrections witnessed in all the tribal belts of the country from time to time. In every part of India the impact of British rule led to new social formations among the tribal people. Ownership of tribal communities was now replaced by the *de jure* ownership of the state, which ultimately led to the exploitation of the forest resources with total disregard for the needs of the tribal economy. The commercialization of forest had another aspect, that is, the natural missed forest which provided the tribes with the raw materials for their household implements and bamboo for baskets, and such items of food as mangoes, tamarind, jack fruits, and edible berries, were now being replaced by plantations of teak, eucalyptus and various coniferous etc., all lucrative commercial crops.

Further the new land tenure system deprived the tribal population of their communal rights over forests and lands forcing those two given up many vital activities which were customary rights and essential for day-to-day living. They were brought under a new bourgeois legal, property and administrative setup which uprooted them from their own patterns of justice based on a different set of norms and values. Further British policies encouraged an influx of zamindars, their representatives, forest contractors, traders, moneylenders, administrators, and educationists (predominantly missionaries) into the tribal areas. These sections of people exploited the tribals with the political and judicial backing of the colonial government. Vast sections of tribal people were transformed into landless labourers and bonded serfs who were economically and socially dependent on the various categories of people described above. This had a devastating effect on every aspect of tribal life. This was an all India process operating unevenly.

In this context there were broadly three processes of colonial expansion that had impact on the tribal people. The first was the process of reclamation of lands for cultivation that led to severe land alienation among the tribal people. The second major factor influencing the patterns of tribal livelihood was the complete ban on shifting cultivation in government forests. The third major process affecting tribal economies was the penetration of industrial capitalism in forested areas. Here the focus was not only on felling of timber but more importantly on the non-timber forest produce which formed an important supplementary part of tribal income. The rise in the world demand for minor forest produce led to the influx of European capital into forested areas and changed the very nature of production relations.

Conclusion:

This paper can be concluded that one has to initiate the dialogue between the past and the present in order to understand the identity formation among the tribes in Indian history. However, the identity formations are different from region to region in tribal belts of India. In this paper an attempt has been made only to understand the general sceneries of tribal identity formation in Indian history. This paper shall give an idea to make a new discourse and dimensions for the understanding of the tribal identities from a historical perspective. In this context Virginius Xaxa's⁴⁰ argument is very much pertinent. He argues that the tribal identity issue has not only been articulated in cultural terms but also political terms and historical terms. It can also be understood that tribal identity mainly focuses on ethnic identity. This means that ethnic homogeneity, along with other factors, characterizes a tribe. Tribe represents a historical continuity and exclusiveness. Groups which had been living together without losing or diluting their specific characteristics were formed into tribe. The formation of the tribal identity, as indeed that of tribes, was a product of territorial, economic, ecological and technological isolation. In other words, human groups of a similar ethnicity which remained isolated than the rest of the world through geography, or the use of a specific primitive technology or through economic specificity were formed into a tribe and came to acquire a tribal identity.

References

¹ Andre Beteille, 'Anthropology and Some Indian Problems', *Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology*, Calcutta, 1972, p.188.

² E.R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization*, Random House Inc, New York, 1962; M.H.Fried, *On the Concept of Tribe and Tribal Society*, Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, Serious-II, No. 4, pp.527-540.

³ Ibid

⁴ M.Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1977, pp.76-87.

⁵ N.K.Behura and Nilakantha Panigrahi (ed), *Tribals and the Indian Constitution*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2006, pp.6-7.

⁶ Neeladri Battacharya, 'Introduction', *Studies in History*, 14. 2, 1999, pp.165-171.

⁷ K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1985.

⁸ Romilla Thaper, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Blackswan, Delhi, 1978, pp.152-193.

⁹ Ibid, p.152.

¹⁰ H.H Risely, *The People of India*, Thacker Spink & Co, Calcutta & Simla, 1908.

¹¹ Jaganath Pathy, *Tribal Peasantry Dynamics of Development*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1984, p.46.

¹² Ibid, pp.47-48.

¹³ Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1975.

¹⁴ Aloka Parasher Sen, 'Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest Dwellers in the Mauryan Period', *Studies in History*, 14, 2,1998.

¹⁵ Ibid,p.179.

¹⁶ Kautilya quoted in Aloka Parasher Sen, 1998, p.179.

¹⁷ Romilla Thaper, op.cit., 1978, p.181.

¹⁸ Aloka Parasher Sen, op.cit., 1998, pp.173-191.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.159.

²⁰ Ibid, p.177.

²¹ R.S Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*, MacMillan India Limited, Delhi, 1983, p.XVI.

²² Ibid.

²³ Suranjit K Saha, "Early State Formation in Tribal Areas of East Central India", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol: 31, No. 13 (March 30, 1996), pp.824-834.

²⁴ K.S. Singh, 'A Study in State Formation among Tribal Communities', in R. S. Sharma (Ed), *Indian Society: Historical Probing*s, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984,p.318.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Amalendu Guha, 'Ahom Migration: Its Impact on Rice Economy of Medieval Assam', *Artha Vignana*, 2 (9), 1967.

²⁷ Bani Prasanna Misra, 'Agrarian Relations in a Khasi State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XIV,1979, pp.888-892.

²⁸ C.Von Furer Haimendorf , *The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1979.

²⁹ R.D. Holder, "An Abstract of the Annals of the Nagbasi Raj Family of Chotanagapur", *Man in India*, Vol:II, 1928.

³⁰ Brijraj Chouhan, *Towns in the Tribal Setting*, National Publishing House, Delhi, 1970, p.27.

³¹ Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

³² Cited in Jaganath Pathy, op.cit.,1984.

³³ Sumit Guha, 'Claims on the Commons: Political Power and Natural Resources in Pre-Colonial India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39, 2 & 3, 2002, pp. 181-196.

³⁴ Nandini Sinha, *State Formations in Rajasthan: Mewar during the Seventh- Fifteenth Centuries*, Manohar, Delhi, 2002.

³⁵ Jaganath Pathy, op.cit., 1984, pp.53-54.

³⁶ Sumit Guha, *Environment And Ethnicity In India: 1200-199*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.8.

³⁷ James C Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2011.

³⁸ Ajai Skaria, 'Being Jangali: The Politics of Wilderness', *Studies in History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 1998, pp. 193-215. Also see Ajai Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests Frontiers and Wildness*, Delhi, 1998.

³⁹ K.S. Singh, op.cit.,1985, p.12.

⁴⁰ Virginius Xaxa, "Tribal Identity: A Discourse" in Vulli Dhanraju (Ed), *Debating Tribal Identity: Past and Present*, Dominant Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, pp.33-71.