

Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective

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Anthropologists have been from the very beginning engaged in the study of tribes, and it is in some sense to this study that their discipline owes its distinctive identity. When historians, political theorists, sociologists and others have to deal with tribes, they turn to anthropologists for expert opinion on what tribes are and how they are constituted. In some countries what constitutes a tribe is of concern also to administrators and policy makers, and they too expect advice and guidance from anthropologists. Yet it cannot be said that anthropologists are themselves in agreement about the concept, and their disagreement is, if anything, even larger today than it was in the past.

A possible reason for the widening of disagreement is that anthropologists now study not only a wider range of topics but also a wider variety of societies. Until the 1930s or 1940s they confined their attention mainly to simple, pre-literate, small-scale and isolated societies in Australia, Melanesia, the Pacific Islands, North and South America, and sub-Saharan Africa. This was true as much of Boas, Lowie, Wissler and their pupils in the United States as of Rivers, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and their pupils in the Commonwealth. The tribe was here the centre and focus of attention and, except where note had to be taken of recent changes introduced as a result of exposure to European culture, it was considered as a self-contained unit.

A major change of orientation came about in the 1940s when anthropologists began to claim that their discipline had a distinctive contribution to make to the understanding of not only tribes but also civilisations. This move was first made in the United States where the work of Robert Redfield stands as a kind of watershed, although he had an illustrious predecessor in A.L. Kroeber. Redfield popularised the study of the peasantry, especially in Latin America and Asia, and the view that peasants are 'part societies' and 'part cultures'. The interest in studying large wholes gathered strength from other sources as well, and the study of civilisations in India, in the Arab world and in China, Japan and Indonesia has become as important as, if not more important than, the study of tribes.

The study of civilisations has given anthropologists a new awareness of the importance of history. The anthropologist who studies tribes in India today does not necessarily confine himself to the present or even the recent past, but might try to go back to medieval if not ancient times. An important issue in the study of tribes today is how we understand the relationship between tribe and civilisation. It is here that I would like to make a distinction between two approaches which I will describe as the 'evolutionary' and the 'historical'. The evolutionary approach takes a long-range view of the passage of time and stresses the *succession* of social formations. Evolutionists no doubt recognise the presence of survivals, but these are regarded as anachronisms, which they probably are on a sufficiently extended time scale. The historical approach limits itself to a particular framework of space and time and stresses the *co-existence* of different social formations within that framework. What is regarded as an anachronism in the evolutionary perspective may appear as a necessary component in the historical framework.

Morgan's conception of the tribe and Durkheim's conception of the polysegmental society were both rooted in the same evolutionary perspective. Their successors chose their examples not from India, China and the Islamic world, but from Australia, the Pacific Islands and North America

where recent historical experience brought out the disjunction rather than the co-existence of tribe and civilisation. Western civilisation penetrated these areas in modern times, and tribe and civilisation stood opposed there in every particular of race, language and culture. In many parts of the Old World the situation was different. There tribe and civilisation had co-existed for centuries if not millennia, and were closely implicated in each other from ancient to modern times. In India the effort to disentangle tribe from caste began in a systematic way during British rule and led to unforeseen results.

Ethnographic material from India did not figure prominently in the general discussion regarding the definition of tribe. The problem in India was to identify rather than define tribes, and scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones. This is not to say that those engaged in drawing up lists of Indian tribes did not have their own conceptions of tribe, but those conceptions were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. Lists of Indian tribes were, in fact, drawn up, with or without benefit of clear and consistent definitions. These lists are not only in current use, but provide constitutional guarantee of tribal identity to those included in them. The present list shows more than 400 tribes with an aggregate population of over fifty million persons accounting for 7.76 percent of the total population. Even a cursory look will show that it includes the widest variety of social formations, from small food-gathering bands to vast populations of settled agriculturists comprising three million persons and more. Indian anthropologists have been conscious of a certain lack of fit between what their discipline defines as 'tribe' and what they are obliged to describe as 'tribes', but they have sought a way out of the muddle by calling them all 'tribes in transition'. This does not settle the issue because in India tribes have always been in transition, at least since the beginning of recorded history.

Among recent attempts to provide a general definition of tribe, those by Ellman Service and by Marshall Sahlins have received some attention. What is interesting about their definitions is that they are part of a general classification of social formations set in an evolutionary framework. Underlying the classification is the dichotomy between 'State' and 'non-State' societies, but non-State societies are not viewed as being all of the same kind: they are divided into bands, tribes and chiefdoms. The principal novelty in this scheme, it seems to me, is not the distinction between band and tribe or between tribe and chiefdom, but the definition of the tribe system. As Sahlins put it, 'A tribe is a segmental organisation. It is composed of a number of equivalent, unspecialised multifamily groups, each the structural duplicate of the other: a tribe is a congeries of equal kin group blocs'. Although the study of tribes had been the staple of Anglo-American anthropology from Morgan to Malinowski, the concept of segmentary system entered the scene relatively late, with the publication in 1940 of *The Nuer* and of *African Political Systems*. It is true that the idea of segmentary system had been used extensively in the 1890s by Durkheim, but it did not catch the imagination of students of tribal societies until the 1940s.

The idea of segmentary system has had a very wide appeal among anthropologists working in different parts of the world. It has given a focus to the study of tribes in the Islamic world, particularly in the Maghreb. It has enriched our understanding of the social system of the Pathans on what used to be the north-western frontier of India although there, as Barth has shown, tribe is already to some extent inter-woven with caste. There are, however, large parts of the world where the segmentary principle by itself does not greatly illuminate our understanding of what are commonly recognised as tribes. A tribe is best described as a segmentary system where it has a particular type of clan and lineage structure most fully developed among the Arabs but also found in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. There are various difficulties in making the segmentary principle as described by Evans-Pritchard in his studies of the Nuer and the Cyrenaicans the defining feature of tribes in all parts of the world. On the one hand, Sahlins

himself argues for a very restricted use of the term 'segmentary system'; and, on the other, the contributors to *African Political Systems* give no indication of using 'tribe' and 'segmentary system' as interchangeable terms.

These or similar considerations must have weighed with Sahlins, for in 1968 he modified his original fourfold scheme of 1961 into a threefold scheme, comprising band, tribe and State. The category 'tribe' was expanded to include tribal chiefdoms in addition to the segmentary tribes which had earlier made up the whole category. It is not as if Sahlins saw no difference whatever between segmentary and chiefly tribes but he felt on reconsideration that the difference entailed no discontinuity, that they were 'permutations' of the 'same general model'. But, as Godelier has rightly pointed out, if Sahlins went so far in one direction to include chiefdoms in the category of tribes, he might have gone a little in the other direction to include bands as well within the same category. The need to define tribe in an evolutionary perspective has been reiterated by Godelier in a recent critical essay. For Godelier the tribe is at one and the same time a type of society and a state of evolution. As he has put it, 'The link between the two uses of the term tribe, seen as a *type of society* and as a *stage of evolution*, is very clear since, each stage of evolution is characterised by a specific mode of social organisation'.

He attributes the failure of anthropologists to arrive at a clear conception of the tribe to their lack of a consistent theory of evolution. For Godelier there is a fundamental difference between tribe and chiefdom because inequalities of class which are absent in the former become established in the latter. Work is organised differently in the two types of society and the primacy of kinship is undermined by the appearance of class in the evolution from tribe to chiefdom. The assumption here is that wherever we find chiefdom we will also find a division into classes. This, as the editors of *African Political Systems* had warned us, is far from the case. Even in the African chiefdom, 'Distinctions of rank, status or occupation operate independently of differences of wealth'. Moreover, as recent students of the subject have realised, a segmentary system need not necessarily be acephalous.

Godelier's essay exposes the limitations of the evolutionary point of view. The evidence is too thin to support his assumption of the uniform co-variation of mode of livelihood, kinship structure and political system within the range of societies with which we are concerned. Both segmentary tribes and tribal chiefdoms are supported by various modes of livelihood. The Tallensi and the Bemba are both agriculturists, the Tallensi having fixed and the Bemba shifting cultivation, but they have very different political systems. The Nuer and Logoli of Group B and the Zulu and Ngwato of Group A alike practise mixed agriculture and cattle husbandry. There is, if anything, an even greater range of variation in the nature and function of kinship in each of the two types of society.

It would be a great convenience if some simple scheme could be devised for classifying the 400 odd communities designated as tribes in India. Various classifications have been proposed on the basis of ecological, racial, linguistic, religious and other criteria. Perhaps the most convenient is the one persistently recommended by N.K. Bose on the basis of mode of livelihood: hunters and gatherers, animal herders, shifting cultivators and settled agriculturists. But very little is to be gained by trying to fit this kind of classification into any rigid evolutionary scheme. It is now being increasingly recognised that tribes with some of the simplest technologies have been more closely integrated with the wider society than others with a more advanced technology. If isolation, self-sufficiency and autonomy are characteristics of the tribal condition, there is no simple correlation between these and the level of technology.

Not all anthropologists who write about tribes adopt an evolutionary perspective. Morton Fried

has presented us with a rather different notion of tribe. He has not only criticised existing definitions but argued that the very concept of tribe, so extensively used by anthropologists, is inherently ambiguous. His criticism is very far reaching, and we must examine briefly the factors behind the ambiguities it has exposed.

It was Morgan's argument, which Godelier repeats with approval, that the tribe is a '*completely organised society*'. When we speak of the tribe as a '*completely organised society*', we assume that there are boundaries separating tribes from each other and from other types of society. What is the nature of these boundaries? Can they be easily recognised? Do they really exist? No student of tribal life in India can afford to ignore these questions. But the boundary problem has its own peculiar features in India, for what is unclear there is not so much the boundary between one tribe and another as that between tribe and non-tribe. The boundaries between tribes are perhaps a little more clear than Fried would allow for, because in India tribes have since time immemorial lived in the shadow of a civilisation which has been strict about maintaining the boundaries between castes.

Fried rejects the argument, apparently popular among some physical anthropologists, that the tribe is a breeding population whose boundaries circumscribe the range of sexual relations. He marshals evidence to show that not only unsanctioned sexual unions but also socially approved marriages frequently take place across the boundaries of what are called tribes. But the point about outmarriages ought not to be taken too far. There are probably genuine differences here between, let us say, Amazonia and South Asia. In India tribes such as Khasi, Garo, Santal, Munda, Oraon and many others are known to have a marked preference for endogamy which is not surprising in view of the high value placed on endogamy everywhere in India. As I shall point out later, there have been innumerable cases of tribes becoming castes – the Indian equivalent of 'passing' - and when this happened, the rule of endogamy was probably reinforced

Fried also questions the test of language, or the view that each tribe has its own distinctive language which defines its boundaries. 'The idea,' he says, 'that tribes, whatever else they may be, are somehow minimal speech communities, turns out to be no sounder than the notion that they are basic breeding populations'. There are well-known examples, even in small-scale societies, of people speaking the same language being divided into several endogamous groups as well as examples of people intermarrying though their native languages are different. Again, the significance of language in the definition of tribe will depend on the extent to which the tribe is implicated in the civilisation in its vicinity.

In India the test of language has always been an important one in the identification of tribes. There are fifteen officially recognised languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of which four belong to the Dravidian family and the rest to the Indo-Aryan family. Besides these, there is an assortment of several hundred languages, usually not counted as literary languages, and spoken by smaller populations, though in some cases these may comprise as many as a couple of million persons each. By and large, it is the communities associated with these languages that are recognised as tribes in India.

Two brief comments must be made here about the relationship between civilisation, language and tribe. The Dravidian languages of India include not only Tamil, which is one of the oldest literary languages of the world, but also languages spoken by a number of tribes such as the Baiga and the Kond who lived by shifting cultivation until the other day. The Tamils are proud of their ancient and medieval civilisation which created elaborate irrigation works on the one hand, magnificent temples on the other, but their cultural affinity with some of the simplest tribes of peninsular India would appear to be beyond dispute. In a recent impressive work, Trautman has

shown how the Tamils share the same fundamental structure of kinship and affinity with the Baiga and the Kond. Further, Dravidian kinship, in both its 'civilised' and 'tribal' forms, is markedly different from North Indian kinship. Nothing could demonstrate more effectively the hazards of using kinship as a basis for discriminating between 'tribe' and 'civilisation' or 'tribe' and 'State'.

The second point to note is that some of the tribes, including a few very large ones, have no separate language of their own but use the language prevalent in the region they inhabit. This is particularly common in the western part of India, in the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. There obviously has been a loss of language in some cases but it is impossible to date this loss in most cases. When the loss of language is accompanied by a loss of other cultural traits, a sort of invisible threshold is crossed, and the tribe ceases to function as a tribe although it does not thereby lose its identity as a community.

Economic relations can of course be easily shown to overflow the boundaries of the tribe, no matter how we define 'tribe'. Fried would argue that the political boundaries of what are called tribes are usually far less clear than is assumed in the model of either the tribal chiefdom or the segmentary tribe. It may be recalled that Evans-Pritchard's original model of the segmentary political system was presented as a kind of solution to the boundary problem among the Nuer who lack all constituted political authority. If a conflict took the form of feud, it was within the tribe; if of war, it was between one tribe and another. This method of solving the boundary problem cannot be easily applied everywhere, for even if we admit that the segmentary principle is a kind of universal principle, its operation does not have everywhere the same consistency and constancy that Evans-Pritchard reported it to have among the Nuer. The model of the tribe as a segmentary system is a tempting one, but one faces many pitfalls in yielding to the temptation.

Fried's argument would therefore be that what are generally designated by anthropologists as tribes represent neither a definite type of society nor a definite stage of evolution. They are too amorphous and too assorted to qualify for either role. The tribe, according to Fried, is much better regarded as a kind of secondary phenomenon which in the typical case acquires its form and identity from some external source.

While being bold, I shall go on to say that most tribes seem to be secondary phenomena in a very specific sense: they may well be the product of processes stimulated by the appearance of relatively highly organised societies amidst other societies which are organised much more simply.

The formation of a tribe as a secondary phenomenon is familiar to anthropologists. Perhaps the best known example in the literature is that of the Makah Indians who, according to Elisabeth Colson, were given their present identity by the Indian Service of the American Government: 'The people regarded as Makah, by themselves and by those who are not of their group, are such by a political definition framed to organise a group of people with political rights as members of the Makah Tribe'. Extending her observations to another continent, Colson argues that 'contemporary African tribes are either new forms of political organisation created for administrative purposes by the modern states within which they exist or they represent the emergence of self-conscious nationalistic movements comparable to those of Europe and Asia'.

It is true that in some parts of the world colonial rule has had cataclysmic effects, dissolving old identities and precipitating new ones. But to say that tribes as we now know them are all of recent origin or are all secondary phenomena would be to take a holiday from the lessons of history. Tribe and civilisation have encountered each other for centuries in many parts of the world, and it

is only in some areas and at certain periods that the encounter has been sudden and cataclysmic.

In the historical relations between State and tribe, the State has not by any means always had the upper hand. Not only has it often lacked the strength to resist encroachment by tribes, but the tribal way of life has appeared to many as superior to that represented by the State. Writing about the Pakhtuns in what used to be the north-western frontier of India, a recent observer notes, 'Indeed as far as they are concerned, it is "state" and not "tribe" which occupies the periphery of things, and it is to the state *all* the characteristics of the peripheral attach, most especially dissipation'.

We should neither ignore the civilisation in the background when we write about tribes, nor argue as if the relationship between tribe and civilisation were the same everywhere. It is here that we see the flaws in both of the two schemes proposed by Sahlins. It is one thing to make a direct contrast between tribe and State. Sahlins does not stop there but proceeds to divide tribes into tribal chiefdoms and segmentary tribes, adding bands at the other end. Surely, this should oblige him to consider corresponding distinctions among what he calls states, for these differ among themselves as much as do stateless societies. To take two neighbouring countries, the Soviet State is very different from the State in Afghanistan in many respects, and certainly in relation to tribes. It may be preferable in a historical context to speak of civilisation rather than State as the complement of tribe, for certainly in the Indian case, civilisation has shown far greater unity and continuity than any state.

The coexistence of tribe and State has been discussed by students of the Islamic world from Ibn Khaldun down to the present. Indeed, what has been stressed in their writings is not merely the co-existence of tribe and State but their complementarity. As a recent student of the Middle East has put it, 'The tribes have always been a part of, as well as being in varying degrees apart from, the Iranian state'. Given the acknowledged significance of the tribal component in the origin and growth of the Islamic State, it would be misleading to refer to these tribes, whether in Ibn Khaldun's time or in our own, as secondary phenomena. Nor can we regard them and the states, which for centuries they regularly overran, as two separate stages of social evolution.

The Islamic tribes were external to the Islamic State in a way in which they were not external to Islamic civilisation. Conversely, subscribing to the values of Islam did not require submission to the discipline of the State. One might even say that some of the most fundamental values of Islam - equality, community, brotherhood - found a more authentic expression in the 'tribal' than in the 'civilised' sector of Islam. The Islamic case teaches us to use the concept of civilisation in two senses: in the first or unmarked sense civilisation includes tribe and in the second or marked sense it is contrasted with tribe. India has unfortunately had no Ibn Khaldun to record and reflect on the relationship between tribe and civilisation in pre-modern times. The Indian intellectual tradition, which is both ancient and rich, is remarkable for its lack of historical sense, and hardly any history was written before the advent of Muslim rule. We are therefore forced to rely on conjecture and reconstruction to a far greater extent than in the case of Europe, China or the Islamic world.

Both historians and anthropologists have noted that in traditional India tribes were not only recognised to exist but were given a definite designation: *jana* as against *jati*. However, it is not easy to determine the exact connotation of the term *jana*, and the distinction between *jana* and *jati*; must have been even less clear in ancient times than the corresponding distinction today between tribe and caste. Each category was heterogeneous and there was always some overlap between the two. The historian Niharranjan Ray has noted that: in Indian historical tradition there were two sets of *janas*, one who are still recognised by anthropologists and sociologists as

tribes...and another set who were at a relatively higher level of socio-economic and political organisation and of aesthetic and religious culture.

It would be rash to seek to identify these two sets of *jana* with segmentary tribes on the one hand and tribal chiefdoms on the other, but it is clear that some of them founded states and joined the mainstream while others either remained isolated or were pushed into marginal areas.

Historians of both ancient and medieval India have spoken repeatedly of the rise to power of tribal dynasties in various places and at various times. Some of these, like the Ahom in the thirteenth century, came as intruders from outside. Others, like the Chandela, allegedly of Gond origin, rose to power from within. It is obvious that the term 'tribe' has been used in a loose sense, meaning different things to different historians, but it is possible to reconstruct with a degree of accuracy the tribal origin of some at least of the ruling dynasties of the pre-British period.

The rise to eminence of a tribal dynasty did not lead necessarily or even generally to a radical change in the mode of life of the tribe as a whole. Only some sections of it would become Hinduised while others might survive more or less in their previous condition. What is characteristic of the relationship between tribe and civilisation in India is that there was virtually no way in which a tribal dynasty could legitimise its rule without becoming Hinduised. This meant, among other things, bringing in Brahmin priests, Barbers, Washermen and the rest, and replicating in due course of time the hierarchical structure of caste. Although only the ruling families or lineages became fully Hinduised, some of this rubbed off on their poorer cousins who might continue in their previous tribal condition, sometimes in the remote hills and forests. This kind of survival cannot in any meaningful sense be described as a secondary phenomenon even where it was affected by influences from a newly established kingdom.

As the State became more powerful and society better organised, the scope available to tribal lineages to establish new dynasties became more restricted. But the State was not the most durable product of Hindu civilisation. The weakness and decay of states always left room for the emergence of tribal chiefs whose aim was to create not tribal chiefdoms so much as kingdoms after the Hindu model.

When a tribal lineage established a Hindu kingdom there occurred what may be described as integration at the top. Although the historical record is likely to furnish evidence of integration mainly at that level, what must have been far more common is integration at the bottom. This kind of integration is by its nature difficult to document for the ancient and medieval periods. It took place whenever a tribe or a section of it, usually through force of economic circumstances, became involved in the larger division of labour by providing specialised products associated with their habit, such as lac, honey, ropes, baskets, mats, etc., or a regular supply of manual labour.

Despite changes in the fortunes of individual tribes and despite incursions into tribal territories by Hindu kings and Hindu ascetics, the tribal identity never became fully effaced in any of the major regions of the country. It is remarkable how close to such renowned ancient and medieval centres of civilisation as Gaya, Ujjain and Madurai tribes could still be found living in their natural setting, so to say, well into the present century. The Hindu kingdom - and to a large extent its Muslim successor - did not seek to eliminate tribes but allowed or even encouraged them to live on its margins. This is not a setting in which one can proceed very far by viewing tribe and state as two distinct and successive stages of evolution.

Students of Indian society and history have been struck repeatedly by the presence of survivals at

every level. As D.D. Kosambi, the historian of ancient India has put it, 'India is a country of long survivals'. Kosambi tried to use these survivals for developing a method for reconstructing India's past. Our concern is not so much with that method, whose limitations are well known, as with the co-existence down to our times of diverse social formations, tribal as well as non-tribal.

Kosambi provides a fascinating thumbnail sketch of this co-existence in his own time - the 1950s - and around his own home in the city of Poona. Nearest in location he found a group of tent-dwelling nomadic families belonging to the Ras Phase Pardhi tribe, divided into six exogamous clans bearing Brahmin and Rajput names; they led a precarious existence by snaring small animals, working as casual labourers and begging. Then there were Ramosis who were rapidly discarding their 'tribal' customs and becoming like the general Maratha peasantry in appearance, language and religious observance. In addition to these there were two Telugu speaking tribal groups, the Vaidu who were snake-charmers and medicine men and the Vaddar who worked as stone cutters.

It is now widely acknowledged that what were until recently regarded as hunting and gathering tribes were in many cases reduced within the last hundred years or so to an economic condition in which they are forced to survive by foraging, begging, thieving and other such activities. These would appear to correspond to the kind of secondary phenomena to which Fried has so convincingly drawn attention. It is almost certain that such secondary phenomena have increased in scale and intensity from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, and the idea of 'ex-criminal tribes', if not of 'criminal tribes', sounds definitely modern. But it would in my view be a mistake to believe that such secondary phenomena have no precedents in the past. Indeed, there is reason to believe that both detribalisation and retribalisation occurred in the distant as well as the recent past. But they did not alter everything, for collective identities often outlived changes in economic and political fortunes.

I have so far been comparing tribe with State - or tribe with civilisation - in a very general way. I must now make a little more specific my comparison of the morphological features of tribal society with those of Hindu society. But what is the morphological analogue of tribe in Hindu society? Is it the whole of Hindu society, or is it the individual caste which is, as it were, the building block of that society?

As soon as we enter into a close comparison, we are struck by a paradox. When we place tribal society beside Hindu society as a whole with its elaborate arrangement of castes, we observe the sharpest possible contrast. Tribal society is homogeneous, undifferentiated and unstratified; Hindu society is heterogeneous, differentiated and stratified. The polarity of equality and hierarchy is much more clearly represented here than in any other comparable case. Muslim society would appear to stand at the other end of the scale, at least on the plane of values.

When, on the other hand, we compare individual castes, which are the constituent units of Hindu society, with individual tribes, we observe a certain homology. Caste and tribe emphasise and perpetuate collective identities in strikingly similar ways; a caste or tribe may change its name and, within limits, also its mode of livelihood and yet retain its collective identity. Other societies, whether Islamic or Christian, are not made up of segments that at least outwardly resemble tribes to such a large extent. Traditional Hindu society was at one and the same time both hierarchical and segmental. It is no accident that observers down the ages have so persistently mistaken castes for tribes, and tribes for castes.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, ethnographers, who were mainly British civil servants working in India, began to publish descriptive catalogues of the tribes and castes in the

different parts of the country. A perusal of these will show how unclear the line of division sometimes is between tribe and caste. There are, firstly, castes of tribal origin in areas in which the caste-based division of labour is well established, and these include both agricultural and artisan groups. But one encounters also the converse phenomenon, namely, the growth of occupational specialisation and the emergence of caste-like groups in the interior of a tribal area. I am not saying that it is generally difficult to distinguish a tribe from a caste, only that the difficulty often arises at the margins of Hindu civilisation.

A number of historians have argued that the Hindu social structure owes its uniqueness to the manner in which it was built up, block by block so to say, by the accretion of tribes. D.D. Kosambi has put it in the following words: The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society. This phenomenon, which lies at the foundation of the most striking Indian feature, namely caste, is also the great basic fact of ancient Indian history. Kosambi was a pioneer among Indian historians in carefully observing the present as a way of understanding the past.

Professor Irfan Habib, our leading authority on Moghul India, has in a recent paper tried to follow Kosambi's lead in tracing the origin of caste. Habib's argument is that the structure of Indian society was not fundamentally different from the structure of other societies, such as Safavid Iran, at comparable levels of material advancement. How then did India come to have a caste system of such great rigidity? Habib makes the interesting point, *contra* Dumont, that virtually all outside observers, from Megasthenes to Bernier were struck not by the "hierarchy" of the system, but its 'hereditary occupation'. In addition to this, he stresses rigid endogamy which he regards as a 'tribal' characteristic. The caste system was in this view the outcome of the fusion into the general society of tribal communities which were from the start rigidly endogamous.

The argument about the caste-based social order in India being built up by the cumulative accretion of tribal communities answers some questions but raises many others. Tribal components have contributed to the origin and development of civilisations everywhere: why did the accretion of tribes lead to the formation of a caste system only in India? Why did the fusion of tribal elements into the general society not lead to the formation of a caste system in medieval Morocco or medieval Poland?

The argument that a strict rule of endogamy was carried over from tribe to caste is not wholly convincing. As Fried has ably demonstrated, endogamy is not a universal characteristic of tribes. If there is evidence of strict endogamy among Indian tribes, "that may be an *Indian* rather than a *tribal* characteristic. Hindu society no doubt carries the marks of tribal culture, but tribal society also carries the marks of Hindu culture in India as it does of Muslim culture in Morocco. The Indian case reveals not only the coexistence of tribe and civilisation but also their interpenetration.

What is important therefore is not that tribal elements fuse into the general society but that collective identities survive the conversion of *tribe* into caste. It is this process that N.K. Bose set out to analyse in his brilliant paper published forty years ago on 'The Hindu method of tribal absorption'. The argument of that paper was elaborated in a book first published in Bengali and later translated into English as *The Structure of Hindu Society*.

I must repeat before presenting Bose's argument that there are over 400 named tribes in India whose conditions vary so much that it would be naive to expect the argument to apply equally well in all cases. At one extreme are the indigenous tribes of the Andaman Islands - the Onge, Jarawa and others - who, until the nineteenth century, remained almost completely isolated from

the mainland and therefore unaffected by the Hindu method of tribal absorption. Then there are the tribes in the north eastern hill areas - Konyak, Abor, Dafla and many others - who, because of their location on the frontier of more than one civilisation, were better able to withstand the pressure to become castes, although the Ahom, now regarded as a caste, were once clearly a tribe, and the Khasi, still regarded as a tribe, were developing a state with unmistakably Hindu features. Even in the north west, in what is now Pakistan, the Swat Pathan, though primarily a group of Muslim tribes, have divisions that are not wholly unlike Hindu castes.

The tribes that have been affected the most by the Hindu method of tribal absorption are the ones in the interior hill and forest areas where influences from other civilisations, whether Islamic or Chinese, have been feeble or absent. These tribes comprise a large array - Bhil, Munda, Santal, Oraon, Saora, Juang and numerous others - and account for the bulk of the tribal population of the country. It was Bose's argument that there was a symbiotic, though unequal, relationship between these tribes and the larger society of castes which became apparent as soon as one viewed them on a sufficiently broad geographical canvas and a sufficiently long historical scale.

Bose took pains to describe the economic context of the symbiosis between tribes and the wider society, arguing that the absorption of the former by the latter was generally of some material advantage to both, though not in the same way or to the same extent. He believed that the caste-based economy and its division of labour enabled it to support populations of greater size and density than in a tribal economy whose material base was at a lower level. When that material base became precarious due to expansion of population or for some other reason, a tribe or a section of it sought economic security through closer attachment to the wider society. This attachment was generally granted by the wider society on the condition that the newly attached group took the lowest position in it. Bose combined fieldwork in the tribal areas with a study of the classical texts to establish his argument.

Bose believed that the whole order of Hindu society, since at least the time of the Mahabharata, had been structured in such a way that a tribe or a section of it was not only allowed but encouraged to maintain a hereditary monopoly over its occupation. Whole groups would thus function as basket makers, or rope makers, or collectors of lac, or dealers of some other product, usually of the forest. But, while specialised occupations were extremely important in maintaining boundaries between groups, such boundaries could be maintained even in their absence through the enforcement of strict rules of endogamy. Bose laid great emphasis on the economic ethic of the wider society which put a high value on hereditary occupations, protected the occupational monopolies of groups and discouraged competition between individuals in the occupational sphere. The distinctiveness of what has been called the Hindu method of tribal absorption is seen when we examine the American approach to the assimilation of tribes till the time of the Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934. Here I turn again to Colson's study of the Makah Indians. The goal of the Indian Service, she tells us, 'was the complete assimilation of the Indians, and therefore the Makah, into American society in as short a period as possible', and this goal would be frustrated 'in so far as they emerged from the moulding process one jot different from the ideal average American'. In the event, the goal was frustrated as it was bound to be: 'Today American Indian tribes continue to exist. They are deviant groups within American society'. The Hindu method of tribal absorption did not seek to efface the tribal identity fully or in the shortest time, and the end product was a caste, usually of the lowest rank but not a deviant group.

Bose has been criticised for dwelling too much on the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the tribe and the wider society and not enough on its asymmetrical and exploitative character. The precariousness of the tribal economy was not always its natural condition. It resulted sometimes from a tribe being pushed back by its more prosperous or better organised

neighbours from a better to a worse location where it could survive only on the lowest economic plane. As a recent writer has tersely observed about a major area of tribal concentration in Bihar, 'it can be surmised that the people of Chota Nagpur remained primitive so that their neighbours could grow'. But, whether these tribes were pushed out or pulled in, their lives were never wholly unaffected by the larger currents of Hindu civilisation.

Our understanding of the transformation of tribe into caste or the fusion of tribal elements into the general society will remain incomplete without an appreciation of the role of the economic ethic of Hinduism. Evidence of oppression and exploitation cannot be used to discount its hold over the minds of people in the entire subcontinent down to our own times. The economic ethic was part of a wider system of beliefs and values which we describe broadly as Hinduism and which overflowed the boundaries of Hindu society in the narrow sense. When a tribe stood on the threshold of closer economic interaction with Hindu society, it would normally not be a complete stranger to the beliefs and values of the society on whose threshold it stood. Hindu saints and ascetics have from time immemorial gone into the remotest hill and forest areas in the pursuit of their religious vocation. It would be a truism to describe the forest as a category of Hindu civilisation. The forest and its people had as important a place in it as the desert and its inhabitants had in Islamic civilisation. Just as the desert was the great source of political renewal in Islam, so was the forest the perennial source of religious renewal in Hinduism.

Sometimes the forest retreat of a saint or an ascetic became a famous centre of pilgrimage, ensuring a regular flow of traffic through the tribal area surrounding it. This traffic might influence the religious life of the tribal people even when they remained largely outside the organisation of economic activities based on caste. There is evidence of deep-rooted and widespread Hindu beliefs and practices throughout the tribal areas in the interior of India. Within the traditional order strict sanctions were developed for maintaining the boundaries between one community and another, but there were no comparable sanctions for maintaining the boundaries between Animism and Hinduism, or between tribe and Hindu society.

In the light of what I have said above, it will be easy to see why I prefer the historical to the evolutionary approach in the definition and identification of tribes. Where tribe and civilisation co-exist, as in India and the Islamic world, being a tribe has been more a matter of remaining outside of State and civilisation, whether by choice or necessity, than of attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from the simple to the complex. We cannot therefore dismiss as anomalous the Indian practice of regarding as tribes a large assortment of communities, differing widely in size, mode of livelihood and social organisation. They are all tribes because they all stood more or less outside of Hindu civilisation and not because they were all at exactly the same stage of evolution. Similarly, a recent student of tribes in Iran and Afghanistan has noted that they range 'from fragmentary and independent communities somewhat resembling the bands of hunting and gathering peoples, considerable differentiation of wealth and status, and many of the trappings of states'.

I have sought to stress the permeability of the boundary between tribe and non-tribe, not to deny the presence of tribes in either the past or the present. The permeability of the boundary in India, in the Islamic world and perhaps also in China obliges us to adopt a flexible rather than a rigid attitude towards the definition of tribe. It makes the presence of borderline cases an inescapable feature of the system, but does not permit us to argue as if all cases were borderline cases. It may be difficult to decide whether the Bhumij in eastern India or the Dubla in western India are a no difficulty in deciding that the Vadama are a caste in Tanjore or the Juang a tribe in Mayurbhanj. The traditional social order tolerated or even encouraged the proliferation of borderline cases, but the modern State cannot afford to do so. It demands clear categories in place of ambiguous ones.

The Indian Constitution now recognises the Scheduled Tribes as a separate category with specific claims and entitlements. The State has thus an obligation to list and label the tribes for whose benefit it has adopted special measures, and these tribes have in their turn acquired a new interest in being listed -and labeled.

The process of designating or 'scheduling' tribes in India began during British rule and acquired a systematic character from the time of the 1931 census. It became involved in political controversy from almost the very beginning. On the one side were the official anthropologists, mostly British members of the Indian Civil Service, who argued that the aboriginal tribes had a distinct identity that marked them out from the rest of Indian society. On the other were the nationalist anthropologists who argued that they were part and parcel of Hindu society. These points of view, though apparently contradictory, have both been accommodated in the present Constitution which recognises that tribes are different from castes, but treats tribals, with individual exceptions, as Hindus all the same.

The Government of India Act of 1935 had introduced special provisions for the tribal people and a list of Backward Tribes was promulgated in that connection in 1936. After the new Constitution was adopted in 1950 the President promulgated in the same year a list of Scheduled Tribes which was based very substantially on the list of Backward Tribes promulgated in 1936 by the colonial government. The list was revised in 1976 and is due for another revision soon. A list of Scheduled Tribes is required in connection with a set of special provisions in the Constitution some of which, though not all, are for only a limited duration of time. The Constitutional provisions have in certain respects sealed the boundaries between tribe and non-tribe, and given to the tribal identity a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past. Until recently a tribe was part of a regional system, and tribes from different regions had little to do with each other. Ao Naga, Munda, Dubla, Baiga and Toda lived their separate lives without a sense of their common identity. The new legal and political order has changed this to some extent. There is now not only a definite tribal identity enjoying a legal sanction but a political interest in maintaining and strengthening that identity.

Political forces released in the last few decades have not only arrested the absorption of tribes into the wider society but have to some extent reversed the process. The case of the Mahato of Chotanagpur illustrates the point. They had been counted as a tribe until 1921, but had themselves declassified in the census of 1931 when they made a bid to identify themselves with the large Kurmi-Mahato caste of Bihar. They are now trying once again to have themselves reclassified as a tribe. Paradoxically, the number of communities deemed to be tribes has increased with the modernisation of India between 1950 and 1976, and the tribal population as a proportion of the total population has risen steadily from 5.30 per cent in 1951 to 7.76 per cent in 1981.

It is doubtful that this assertion of tribal identity in the political domain can be described as retribalisation in any meaningful sense. The categories involved are very different in scale and orientation from those of the past. It is true that collective identities have proved far more durable in the face of economic and political change than was earlier envisaged. But the collectivities to which the label 'tribe' will remain attached will depart in both form and function further and further from what can reasonably be described as tribes.

Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in Comparative Perspective*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp 56-77.

Please note: This article doesn't have the references.

