



the south asianist

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Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 256–266 | ISSN 2050-487X | www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk

In light of the experience of the Bhils, what does it mean to be ‘tribal’?

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The knowledge of the knower is not a 'natural' representation of an external reality
—R. Inden

Indigenous', 'tribal', and 'aboriginal'—these words are frequently used when speaking about some Indian communities, not only by the general public but also by scholars. Yet, the discourse regarding the meaning and relevance of these adjectives being applied to particular communities in India has been heatedly discussed for no less than half a century (Guha, 1999, p. 2). Nevertheless, today there does not exist one answer to the question of whether there are, in fact, 'tribes' in India. While some authors are determined that tribal communities differ dramatically from their peasant neighbours, others are keen to prove back in history they were but the same. The following essay will address the problem of 'tribal' communities of India, the Bhils in particular, in one out of many possible ways of investigating the issue.

Before approaching the situation of the Bhils as it is today, this paper will investigate

the problem of the 'tribal' in general, drawing on the works of scholars who question the term's relevance and its perception in the Indian context. The paper uses terms 'tribal' and 'adivasi' synonymously, although the latter is usually perceived in the meaning of 'aboriginal' or 'indigenous'. As discussed below the question of indigeneity in India is highly disputed. Afterwards, this paper will discuss the process of 'becoming tribal' drawing on the example of the process the Bhils have undergone, and India's current position in terms of its government's political course of action regarding the so-called Scheduled Tribes. To justify the choice of this particular tribe, it should be said that it constitutes one of the biggest 'tribal' forest communities in Western India and has provided research materials for many scholars. Further, the data on the Bhils is extensive, thus aiding in the exercise of tracing the Bhils' process of emergence as a tribal community.

The notion of 'tribal' or 'indigenous'

people is universally acknowledged by the United Nations' Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, when discussing 'tribal' communities in India we face a range of interconnected issues. The question of how one perceives the term 'tribal' in contemporary scholarship touches upon many associated problems being discussed in the modern scientific world. It encourages conversation about some of the most important issues in South Asian studies related to the development of classificatory measures for comparative research, but also for the purposes of colonial administration. The discourse about 'constructions' of what western scholars know about other cultures today is outlined in the works of Said, Inden, and MacKenzie, to name a few, and persists in the minds of scholars across different disciplines. The abovementioned discourse is of particular importance when we approach the problem of Indian 'tribes' because this idea is believed to be one of the many constructions invented by western 'orientalists'. Most researchers share the opinion that there are no 'tribes' in India, at least the way in which the term is understood elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, the Indian Constitution provides a list of Scheduled Tribes that are to be protected and supported in a special way, i.e. through the politics of reservation of positions in government's administration and in the educational units (schools, universities), and in

1987 a special Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples was created to guarantee that 'tribal peoples' rights are being provided (Shah, 2007 p. 1807). Evidently, new government of independent India has not distanced itself from the colonial administrative methods, but instead embraced and developed them in the same course. The problem of 'tribal' communities today is urgent, given that an answer is pending regarding whether the Scheduled Tribes should be allowed to freely integrate into society on their own or whether the government should continue to exercise a course of positive discrimination towards them. There does not yet exist a clear answer. Since the very emergence of the term, 'tribal' people have generally been viewed in two different ways. The first is with a romanticised perception in which forest and mountain-inhabiting peoples live more simply and in harmony with nature. Along with this is the idea that the 'civilised' world should embrace rather than dismiss such models of living. The second is a perception of 'tribals' as 'savage' people who need to be 'civilised' in order to catch up to the rest of the modern world (Shah, 2010, pp. 16-17). Following this, adivasis have been viewed by some as being divorced or detached from mainstream Hindu society, and even with the course of time to claim the "tribal" status they must prove their exclusion from the mainstream cultural and religious life of the

country. Schneiderman and Middleton have described the process of acquiring “tribal” status as an “elaborate cultural acrobatics to create an impression of non-Hindu tribal ethnicity, which often entails marked departure from previous practice” (2008, p. 41). The main argument here is that the idea of “tribal” society emerged externally to India, and scholars and those concerned with “tribal” matters have always viewed adivasis from a perspective of an outsider. By overemphasising cultural and religious difference “tribals” are treated as fundamentally different from the peasant Hindu mass of the population, whereas their similarities in terms of economic and political growth and aspiration are far greater, and arguably of more important social significance. Hardiman argues that the ‘religious beliefs and practices of adivasis were often very similar to those of the mass of the caste-peasantry’ (1987, p.12). The problem of religious ambivalence shaped during the history of adivasi endeavors for self-representation in the most beneficial way is outlined below.

According to Pathy, India today is home to the largest number of so-called 'tribes' in the world (2005: 35). The issue then arises of how one characterises 'tribal' people, given that before counting them, one has to know what is being counted. The fact is that the largest Constitution in the world (in terms of articles and amendments), that of India, although

listing all of the Scheduled Tribes, nevertheless fails to provide any distinguishing factors of the people belonging to those communities. Interestingly, indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world (in Australia and North America, for example) are described as people who inhabited the land before the coming of the 'civilised' people. However, in India there are none who can claim to have been indigenous in that sense, and 'the official position of the Indian state is that there are no indigenous people in India' (Shah, 2007, p. 1807). Moreover, the term 'indigenous' implies the presence of 'settlers' and 'aliens'. Although the steady immigration of Indo-Aryans and others into the Indian subcontinent has been studied extensively, it would be difficult to distinguish them today.

As stated by Guha, the history of the Bhils, as far as modern science can trace it, starts with the first mention of their name in a Sanskrit piece of work “Nrityaratanvali” of Jaya Senapati, concerning different types of dancing traditions dating back to as early as 1240 (1999, p. 108). The most common opinion among linguists is that the name ‘Bhil’ originated in the Dravidian-speaking southern part of the country and travelled north over time. The territory inhabited by the Bhils comprises the region of what is, today, north-east Gujarat and the adjoining areas of Rajasthan. Starting in the fifteenth century, the Bhils are mentioned in many a written sources

as antagonists of the Brahmanical civilisation (Guha 1999: 109). It is assumed that the Bhils were never a part of the so-called Hindu culture, although they did generally interact with its people in everyday matters. Moreover, there is evidence that even as recently as the nineteenth century, one of the higher castes of the region, the Rajputs, would take food and water from the Bhils (Singh 1998: 153). This fact is of utmost importance in India because those who consider themselves Hindu value purity of food and social contact above all and would not dishonour themselves by communicating with those they considered 'wild' and outside of the social system. With the turn of the eighteenth century, there are more detailed accounts of the relations between the Bhils and their neighbours, the Maratha kings in particular.

Most of the evidence available illustrates a high degree of political and social activity by the Bhils. They were not an isolated, savage group of people defending themselves against any manifestations of contemporary civilisation; on the contrary, they were eager to use every opportunity to enjoy the goods their contemporary civilisation could yield (Guha, 1999, p. 110). There is another viewpoint, presented by Skaria, who claims that the Bhils of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were referred to by the surrounding communities as 'jungli', which he interprets as 'wild' or 'forest people' (1999, p. vi). However, it is possible

that calling the Bhils 'jungli' may have implied only that they were people who lived in forests and that it lacked any 'wild' connotation.

The relations between the Bhils and the people from the neighbouring Maratha kingdoms were always active, but not all of them were peaceful. The Bhils conducted raids to collect goods and cattle from the nearest villages, and the native kings tried to put an end to such disastrous activity; as a result, skirmishes between them were not rare. However, sometimes the kings chose another tactic: in order to stop the Bhils from plundering their lands, they gave them money, or luxury goods, which the Bhils either enjoyed themselves or used in trade. Thus, we see that these so-called 'tribals' took part in the political and economic activities of the region to a great extent. Apart from these interactions, their relationships were sometimes to the advantage of both sides. The Bhils were also known for their martial skills and were widely employed in different military roles. For instance, when going to war, kings would recruit the Bhils into their armies. At other times, these 'forest people' were employed as crop watchers, wood-cutters, and hunters (Guha, 1999, p. 112). Because they took part in the economic activities of the region and knew how to take advantage of political tensions in the region, their culture had a significant influence on the whole area. Following this, what developments led to them being

perceived as backward, savage people in the contemporary context? To answer this question, this paper will take a further look into the history of the Bhils during British rule.

In the nineteenth century, even with the British gaining control over the region inhabited by the Bhils, the relationship between those in power and those living in unadministered areas did not significantly change until a certain turn in the colonial political course of the new government. Initially, relations between the Bhils and the British did not differ from those between the Bhils and the Marathas' kings: they were all marked by a continuous process of compromises, achieved with the help either of bribes or of war and threats (Guha, 1999, p. 130). However, later in the century, the Bhils were witness to the 'deconstruction of a system of political relations between the polities of the forest and the open country that had existed for centuries past' (Guha, 1999, p. 135). This was due to fact that the British began to amend laws in ways that created 'social bandits and rebels out of peasant protesters and men of political ambition' (Guha, 1999, p. 134).

Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, the peoples of the region, today called 'tribal' people, slowly began a steady process of becoming artificially marginalised without their participation in the process. What triggered this process was the intent of the government to 'clean' the

country's forests. One witness of the period wrote: "Outlaw Bhils, like wild animals, require a large extent of jungle in which to hide and from which to sally forth" (Guha, 1999, p. 137). Notably, many official reports by administrative officers describe the native landlords that they were dealing as 'grown-up children' or, even worse, as 'idiots'. This attitude was reflected in the kinds of policies that followed. The main aspiration was to deprive the Bhils of their forests in order to 'clean' the country, to make the 'forest folk' settle, and to make peasants out of criminals, as they were regarded at that time. For that purpose especially, the Forest Department was created, gradually taking power and authority from the Bhil chiefs and marginalising their communities (Guha, 1999, p. 140). The policy did not take into consideration the self-perception of the Bhils as warriors, not peasants, or that they viewed the forest as their home. Hardiman argues that even the role of "tribals" in "making of their own history is correspondingly ignored" (1987, p. 9).

The British perception of the Bhils and other 'tribes' as people who could not take care of themselves seemed to justify the dominance of the colonial power. The British claimed that Indians in general were not ready for self-rule and that they were not civilised enough. This notion seemed to last until 1947, when India was given independence. However, the tendency still prevails, given that today the

Indian government seems to be making the same suggestion, only now it is by the government towards the ‘tribes’. The tribes were viewed as ‘backward’ during the British occupation, and though now they are called ‘Scheduled Tribes’, others’ attitudes towards them have stayed the same. The discrimination shown by the British was considered part of their political policy, known as ‘divide and rule’, a policy to which the government of Independent India was determined to put an end. Thus, the government proclaimed ‘backward’ communities to be equal to the rest of the country. Following this people from different regions started migrating to the lands inhabited by the Bhils, settling there, implanting power over the ‘natives’, and making them give space for new communities. However, being driven from their land, the ‘tribals’ showed resistance, which caught the attention of the government and made it realise that ‘although equal, they were different’ (Bates, 1988, p. 231). As well, although since 1950 the Bhils, as the largest ‘tribal’ community in India, have been allowed to vote (Doshi, 2005, p. 135) and take part in political and social activities, they are still viewed as less developed than the rest of the country. As such, the main idea behind the creation of Scheduled Tribes was to ‘help the ‘backward’ people to help themselves’ (Bates, 1988, p. 241), so that ‘ten years hence... the word “tribe” may be removed altogether when they

should have come up to our level’ (Ghurye, 1980, p. 349). It seems the government has undertaken the right course, but it might have been apt to mention the criteria of “backwardness”, because when it is defined in cultural or religious terms it looks like religion and prejudices are interfering into supposedly secular system of governance. When communities are trying to get into the list of Scheduled Tribes the main argument often is that their religious practices vastly differ from those of Hindu. To avoid this artificial construction of new “tribal” peoples it might be the right time for government to provide socio-economic criteria of counting “backwardness”.

Today, the Bhils hold the status of ‘Scheduled Tribe’ and are active participants in political and economical activities in their region, such as reservation policy. According to Doshi, ‘tribals are a different entity economically and socially when compared with the caste Hindus, even though they might live in the same villages’ (2005, p. 136). The Bhils prefer to live in villages where they constitute the majority (Pathy, 2005, p. 38), and although they take part in political decision-making, this rarely reaches beyond the border of a particular village. They also tend to keep together and act more as a union than as individuals. For example, in Rajasthan and Gujarat, a Bhil village is known as a ‘Congress’ or ‘Socialist’ (Doshi, 2005, p. 146), implying the political orientation of the people and underlining the

fact that they are used to considering themselves to be a social unity first and individuals second. Although the Bhils value education very highly, scarcely any of them have a primary education, to say nothing of secondary (Doshi, 2005, p. 143). Because of their illiteracy being involved in all the development schemes and reservation policies and because their actions are collective oriented, they are easy targets for political manipulation.

In modern India, those Bhils that still live in forest areas are under pressure, struggling to prevent the state from cutting down forests, and thus are constantly protesting. Still, the state is determined to make these ‘nomads’ settle and become peasants. Such a change is hard to implement, given that historically the Bhils have been horsemen and warriors. Now they have ‘wild’ status (Skaria, 1999, p. 39), which, for the Bhils, is sometimes considered almost noble, and a justification for their robberies.

The Bhils construct and represent their history not chronologically but divide the whole period of Bhil existence into two main epochs. As described by Skaria, these periods are named Moglai and Mandini and are characterised by the varying degrees of freedom enjoyed by the Bhils (1999, p. 15). More precisely, the first period is one in which the Bhils were free to commit raids, take cattle, and so on, and the second was when they were

bound by laws and authorities that imposed power upon them, forcing them to cultivate land instead of being ‘wild’. The term itself is differently understood among the Bhils, they managed to avoid the western opposition between civilization and wildness. For them being ‘wild’ means being noble, it is synonymous to power, authority (Skaria, 1999, p. ix). Interestingly, these two epochs are not characterised by who was in power, the British or the modern Indian government; the Bhils do not differentiate between them, considering them the same.

Because religion is extremely important in India, not the least because of its interdependence with politics, it has an important part to play in the culture of the Bhils. Hinduism today is considered by a number of scholars (eg. King, 1999, Lorenzen, 2006, Jha, 2002, Fuller, 2004) to be a notion ‘constructed’ by westerners in their attempt to generalise and explain the unknown in simple, common terms. Thus, the concept is rather artificial and should not be accepted as objective. Following this, ‘tribal’ religious marginalisation also seems quite unfair and inaccurate. As well, some ‘tribals’ initially were Hindus, but in order to claim ‘tribal’ status because of the benefits from the governmental schemes, they distanced themselves from the original religion (Bates, 1995, p. 5). As for the Bhils, there is written evidence that they were considered separate

Hinduism arrived, along with some other forest people who were “mentioned among its antagonists in some literature” (Guha, 1999, p. 109). Still, Singh claims, as the result of his survey, that some of the tribes in Rajasthan, the Bhils being one, were adherents of the so-called Bhakti movement, which is considered a religious branch of mystical medieval Hinduism. Thus, he claims that 99 percent of the Bhils in Rajasthan today are indeed Hindu (1995, pp. 8-11). This notion can be explained in different ways. It may be that religious practices differed from one Bhil community to another or that the religious position of the Bhils was marginalised, like their social status, during the period in which orientalism was ‘constructed’. It is difficult to answer this question from a present-day standpoint, but it is clear that the Bhils have their own tradition regarding the two great Indian epics—Ramayana and Mahabharata—that take place within their region (Skaria, 1999, p. 20). If religious determination continues to play a crucial role in politics in the future, non-Hindu people will still be regarded as marginal and outcasts, and that is not a kind of thing to be tolerated in a democratic society India position itself to the rest of the world. Moreover, today religion is, to a great extent, influenced by politics and vice versa, and it is becoming more and more difficult to define where one ends and the other starts, especially in rural communities.

Guha makes the case that ‘the 20th-century isolation of “remote jungle tribes” was an artefact of colonial rule rather than survival of some remote epoch’ (1999, p. 17). Given this, it becomes evident that today’s perception of ‘tribal culture’ is inaccurate and needs to be re-evaluated, especially when it comes to the government’s policy towards such communities. Still, the fact still remains that in modern India, ‘tribes’ do exist in two ways—firstly, the majority of ‘tribal people’ think of themselves as ‘tribal’, and, secondly, the Constitution states as much. Although the notion of ‘tribes’ does not truly describe the actual circumstances, until there is on-going discourse about the ‘tribal’ problem, people’s participation in argument is a kind of acknowledgement in itself.

Today, we can only guess what would have been the position of the Bhils without the British. The policy of the Maratha kings and the early British administrators could not have survived. There is no place for robberies, civil wars, and bribes in the modern democratic state India is eager to become. In order to achieve it, the government would better converse with all people inhabiting the country in a way that benefits both sides. Moreover, it is the task of the state to help all of its citizens initiate communication with each other. It seems that the best way to achieve this is expressed by Pathy, when he says, ‘The principle of internal self-determination should

from Brahmanical culture long before be the guide in setting up the standards for control over their own economic, social, and cultural development’ (2005, p. 43). Referring to groups of people as ‘tribes’ or as ‘indigenous’ and designating them in the Constitution as Scheduled Tribes may benefit them to some degree (e.g. in terms of taxation and reservations), and only a certain community inside the so-called “tribe”, interested in gaining political weight. However, looking at the bigger picture, this draws a line that divides the people of a country and states that one section is above the other. Whereas the role of the government is to treat people equally, and here as Ambedkar mentioned: “The statesman must follow the rule that is to treat all men alike not because they are alike, but because classification and assortment are impossible” (Shneiderman, 2008, p. 44). Thus, being ‘tribal’ in India today is a multidimensional position, characterised by certain perks as well as by drawbacks, but it seems worth keeping in mind being “tribal” entails different conditions not only for adivasis and non-adivasis but also inside the group. Political recognition and welfare are characteristic only to the “tribal” elite, and might not bring any positive change to the rest of the community. Moreover, in some cases as argued by Shah, rural elites “further marginalize the people they claim to

speak for” (2010, p. 12). Internal marginalisation of the so-called “tribal” communities is yet one more field to be further researched upon. Following this, to live a life of an adivasi means something different for each and every one belonging to the Scheduled Tribe, but what it certainly does not mean is either ‘savage’ or culturally backward, as was implied not long ago.

This essay was a quick survey of the problem of production of adivasis given that the field of study is deep and some of its dimensions are still opaque. The main aims of this work were to discuss the problem of applying the term ‘tribal’ in the context of India—as well as the consequences faced by those for whom this term was initially constructed—and to address the implications of using such a notion to describe the lives of real people, particularly the Bhils. Such an examination touches upon many similar problems that are being discussed in the scientific community today, including colonialism and its repercussions and other notions that were once held to be true. Further careful study is necessary, not merely to solve the riddles of the past but to suggest a way of living that will not cause, in the future, the same problems as those now faced by the ‘tribal’ people in India. 🌍

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