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On the notion of 'tribes' from a demographic perspective: the Indian case

Abstract

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Although there is, not surprisingly, no single (globally accepted) definition of tribes, they are ordinarily (or simplistically) viewed as those distinctively homogenous (and primitive) groups of peoples who are *somewhat* outside the mainstream (and modern) civilisation.¹ However, defining a tribe indeed constitutes, especially in academic anthropological literature, an important, albeit complex, issue itself.² In fact, defining tribes in the context of Indian subcontinent is even more complex partly because, unlike in most other parts of the world, the rising civilisation here neither eliminated nor quite absorb these primitive inhabitants of the land, thereby leaving room for their continuity side by side the 'mainstream'. Indeed this prolonged and distinctive coexistence of numerous tribal communities side by side the 'mainstream' serves as a good ground on which anthropologists build up their disciplinary discourse and rich ethnography. The 'tribes' as a subject of academic inquiry seem to have been almost the 'birthright' of Indian anthropology. But there are understandably wide possibilities and perhaps necessities too for more inter-disciplinary perspectives and approaches.

The complexities surrounding the notion of tribal identity in the Indian subcontinent is fairly evident in the existing large (and even expanding) academic discourse developed by contributions chiefly from historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. Indeed several

¹ Oxford Dictionary defines a tribe thus: 'a race of people; now applied especially to a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief; quoted in Ray 1972:8.

² See B eteille 1986 for a succinct discussion on various approaches to a general definition of tribe.

distinct dilemmas in the existing tribal discourse seem pretty apparent. First, although tribes have been intensively and extensively studied – especially for many decades both before and after Independence, they often appear as obscure as ever. They have been highly glorified on several counts especially by older-generation anthropologists, but the dominant image of them is still rather vague, indifferent and indeed full of misconceptions. They are often portrayed as ‘original’ inhabitants and practitioners of early civilisation and culture, which by many appropriate standards was ‘advanced’, but they currently appear extremely marginalised and, to some, even alien. Documents and narratives – official and non-official – pile up, describing vividly and eloquently their relative plight, but their acute vulnerability seems to remain.

These persisting dilemmas almost certainly reflect a resolute and real ambivalence towards tribes on the part of the state that stands, as is often the case in a democratic polity, on the electoral support of vast non-tribal mainstream. This said, the academic discourse developed so far on tribes, their problems and remedies cannot be exonerated of deficiencies and delusions in its understanding and policy guidance. For example, a long-standing popular perception, namely that notion of *aggregate* tribal people is almost meaningless, has fed into methodological biases of anthropology, which in turn shaped tribal discourse as being devoid of a cohesive, consistent picture and statement on problems and remedies of tribal people as a whole. While not questioning the usefulness of anthropological study of individual tribal groups at a micro-level, it should also be noted that diversities - sociocultural, environmental, geophysical - are prominent and relevant not only among numerous tribes, but among similarly manifold non-tribal groups too. In fact it is not obvious enough as to why *diversity*, rather than commonality, among tribal population should be *more* deserving of attention, research and publicity vis-à-vis among non-tribal population, say lower caste groups.

In fact our attempt at the construction of a demographic perspective on Indian tribes is premised on the notion that *aggregate* tribal population is valid not only in statistical and quantitative terms, but it can be conceptually meaningful and functionally useful too. Its intuitive justification is simple enough: if aggregate (or rather average) patterns (e.g. demographic, sociocultural) of all tribes are distinguishably different from those of their non-tribal counterparts, this can well be a basis for treating *total* tribal

population as one entity (vis-à-vis the latter). Relatedly, unlike anthropological bias for exclusive focus on individual tribes, our approach analyses and evaluates overall demographic features and their sociocultural underpinnings of aggregate tribes in a comparative light, particularly in relation to those of their closest non-tribal counterparts, namely aggregate lower caste (officially known as Scheduled Caste, SC) people. The proposed paper would rely mostly on census-used 'working' (or operational) definitions of tribal and non-tribal people. This is not to deny that the census information on tribes is not perfect. However, considering the mine of information that the census operations over a century have made available on tribal population, this is, on several counts, almost the single best source for systematic and coherent generalisations necessary for scientific knowledge and understanding of a population. In fact the use of official (or 'operational') definition and information (including census) - by enabling discovery of distinct demographic features of aggregate tribes – can open up possibilities of a fresh light on the notion of 'tribe' itself.³

More specifically, the chief purpose of this paper is two-fold: one, to discover, stylise and present the core general demographic features of *aggregate* tribal population; and second, to establish their linkage with the common (or core) sociocultural patterns and characteristics of aggregate tribal population. Against the backdrop a long-standing air of uncertainty over the distinction between tribes and castes, our proposed comparative analysis should provide a good opportunity for sharpening the notion of 'tribes'.⁴

Despite substantial local-level literature, ethnography, and narratives on sociocultural features of diverse tribal peoples, the tasks of stylising them and linking them to general (common) patterns of demographic outcomes and behaviour (as can be gleaned from large-scale surveys, civil registration and censuses) have remained overdue so far. This is remarkable, because demographic (and other) information on Indian tribes

³ For example, in consonance with large-scale initiatives and projects in development and modernisation, there has been a discernible shift in orientation of the studies on Indian tribes, namely from a focus on tribes as communities to a view of them as subjects of modernisation and development or as their victims. Indeed the contemporary discussion on so-called 'alternative development' often accords a very prominent place to tribal peoples, who are frequently seen as principal victims of such ecological degradations (Xaxa 2003).

⁴ This paper would be drawing substantially on parts of my forthcoming book, *Demographic*

is not only fairly rich and comprehensive, but uninterrupted availability of them dates as back as the 1870s (when census operations had started), offering opportunities - of course not unlimited - for analysing both cross-sectional and temporal patterns. All this does not mean that the demographic data on tribal population are just plenty and perfect, but much of them, as would be illustrated in this paper, can indeed be utilised - albeit with proper caution and sometimes via possible cleansing and supplementing - for systematic investigation into several prominent issues.

Regional and local-level diversities notwithstanding, the ST and SC groups at *aggregate* (all-India) level do not appear very differently stationed, with a pretty similar socio-economic footing in terms of such hardcore indicators as income, consumption, asset possessions, poverty, occupation, but they have vastly different sex ratios. For example, the aggregate tribal population appear to own more land per household than the SC counterparts do on the whole; or the former are, according to large-scale sample survey results at least till recent past, *not* found considerably more inflicted by 'income-poverty'. However, on the matter of two key human needs, namely health and education, tribals, overall, appear most deprived, and even distinctly worse than the aggregate SC population. For example, continuing to go by sex ratio as a rough index of gender relations, its long-term trend does point to temporal erosion of the traditional tribal feature of balanced gender relations – rather fast over last several decades. As would be argued in the context of historical past, the high female-male ratio in tribal population was indeed broadly consistent with other demographic and sociocultural features, which are broadly akin to high gender equity, female status and autonomy. For instance, tribal females' nuptial features in the past – namely, marrying relatively late and only after 'maturity' and mostly on self-chosen (consent) basis, freedom to divorce and remarry, comparatively large proportion of celibates – are a reasonable pointer to a *relatively* high status and autonomy that tribal women had enjoyed historically. This (with implied absence of 'son preference') in turn seems to have had its reflection – in line with existing prominent perspective on fertility differential between different degrees of patriarchy and female autonomy – in a *comparatively* low tribal fertility in the historical past. This could obtain both because of sociocultural practices like longer duration of

breast feeding and child spacing, and postpartum taboos as well as via use of traditional indigenous abortion and contraceptive methods. As recent researches suggest, a large chunk of historical populations across the globe had evolved various institutional and cultural mechanisms of keeping a long-term check on childbearing,⁵ but notably their basis and efficacy seem to have often called for reasonable level of female autonomy and equity in gender relations. Similarly, as would be argued, because of several sociocultural features, lifestyle patterns and practices (e.g. prolonged breastfeeding and relatively long child-spacing, greater intimacy and adaptability with natural environment), India's overall *tribal mortality*, particularly in infancy and childhood years, has been historically lower than that of their non-tribal counterparts. While this may sound somewhat startling vis-à-vis commonplace view being almost the opposite, it meets up with little surprise when placed along with similar findings for tribes in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and even elsewhere of the globe (e.g. Wirsing 1985).

Indeed, such traditional features of tribal demographic behaviour have continued to be manifest as an aggregate baseline in contemporary period too, although, owing to mounting complexities of tribal existence as well as substantial accumulation of evidence with passage of time, the picture appears more complicated and varied presently. For example, availability of modern medicines/treatment for secondary sterility and sexually transmitted diseases, together with negative effects on some traditional practices (e.g. reduction of breastfeeding duration, indigenous contraceptive methods, sexual abstinence) might have often led to (pre-transition) rises in tribal fertility. Moreover, as would be shown, what was, of tribal societies, akin in some key respects to European marriage patterns, has been replaced – in varying pace across tribes and regions – by mainstream Hindu practices, namely early marriage via parental negotiation with dowry. Such lowering of female marriage age has in many cases (perhaps especially where modern family planning programme is not effective) pushed up tribal fertility or has impeded its transition in the recent past. On the other hand, there are locations where tribal people have experienced even larger fertility decline compared to their counterparts, as they could be more easily brought under mass sterilisation programmes

⁵ See e.g. Cleland 2001; Wison and Airey 1999; Davis 1986.

(via e.g. cash incentives, informal coercion, or sometimes even because of their greater affinity and acceptability of fertility control).

Apropos mortality, the past (relative) superiority of aggregate tribal population (particularly in infancy and childhood years), though it has continued to be manifest at an aggregate level *till recently*, has been eroded over more contemporary period and indeed reversed over very recent past (Maharatna 2000). And this reflects, chiefly, a growing *relative* deprivation and vulnerability in livelihood and wellbeing including modern health care facilities. In fact in some regions such as Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh the tribal population seem to have experienced even some (occasional) increases in mortality levels in the recent past. Although overall trend of contemporary mortality level (e.g. infant and child mortality, maternal and adult male death rates) for aggregate tribal population is, like those of non-tribal groups, of course one of decline, the pace and magnitude are clearly lower for the tribals. This would seem ironical if tribes used to experience, as India's overall tribal population arguably did, a *relative* superiority in mortality (vis-à-vis non-tribal groups) in historical past, when modern medical science was rudimentary, and adaptability with natural environment and lifestyle and other related practices were comparatively important in shaping mortality. And the gradual erosion and even reversal in more recent periods, of tribal mortality advantage clearly mean that they have been lagging behind non-tribal population groups in experiencing contemporary mortality improvements along with expansion and advancement of health and medical infrastructure. This in fact reaffirms the recent accentuation of their relative deprivation in nutrition and health care facilities (vis-à-vis SC and other non-tribal groups), which is very possibly linked to their growing *relative* disadvantage in the security of livelihood caused by encroachment, and exploitation and displacement.

This said, tribal people historically show remarkable resilience to withstand and overcome various adversities meted out to them. For example, tribals, when faced with distress and disruptions due to external factors, have often resorted to mobility and migration *relatively* readily. While mobility and migration have frequently been a sheer survival response, it is hard to deny a relative flexibility and liberalism of tribal sociocultural structure and organisation that facilitates this process. For instance, our case study of Santals in parts of West Bengal illustrates, a great potential that tribal people

have – via various dynamic and diffusion effects of seasonal migration and mobility of families - in improving their material and social standing and in making substantial advancement in demographic transition. As a corollary, balanced gender relations and greater female autonomy, as is generally observed among tribal communities, would not *automatically* turn conducive to fertility *transition* unless newer ideas, attitudes, and information regarding fertility control and methods are percolated among them.

In this context, no less worrying than the growing *relative* deprivation and vulnerability among aggregate tribal population is the contemporary reversal of traditional gender equities among them. The declining female-male ratio especially over last few decades in tribal population is of course a broad indication of a shift of gender relations against females. There is mounting evidence of growing relative disadvantages that tribal females have been facing along with contemporary processes of economic expansion and integration (via e.g. breakdown of traditional forest-based tribal economy and environment and of shifting cultivation as well as via continuing or growing displacement and forced migration). Apart from anti-female biases of changing production organisation and patterns affecting tribal economy and resource base, direct evidence of female discrimination at household level (e.g. sex-differential in mortality, nutritional status, medical attention) seems to be surfacing in tribal communities – of course in varying pace across locations. This is broadly the manifestation of the trends of tribal people taking increasingly to mainstream (Hindu) sociocultural fold. While such acculturation process and its anti-female implications for tribal gender relations have not escaped attention of individual researchers earlier, our present demographic study exposes and establishes these trends in terms of more systematic and focused evaluation of available statistical evidence at a more general and aggregate level. Ironically, it is the long-standing gender equity in India's tribal communities that perhaps provides some soothe to the uneasiness (and even shame) to the much of outside humanity of the country's mainstream society and culture marked by stark gender biases, intense 'son preference', and even their growing pervasiveness.

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