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The Tribes in Ancient India

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ABSTRACT

In view of a significant number of tribal populace in India and their growing emergence as a formidable part of Indian national panorama at present, it is imperative to trace their origin, nature and status in ancient India. A critical study of ancient Indian texts will show that since the period of Vedic Samhitas, we encounter certain groups of people who were presumed to be the original dwellers of this country and who preferred to remain beyond the periphery of the so-called Aryan and Non Aryan conflict. The present paper will show how these people, later designated as tribes, preferred seclusion from the mainstream society presumably to retain their self identity and how they were treated by the society, a reflection of which can be traced in the ancient Indian texts.

According to Oxford dictionary, a Tribe is “a group of (esp. primitive) families or communities, linked by social, economic, religious or blood ties and usually having a common culture and dialect and a recognized leader”- It is a matter on record that tribes in India constitute 8.14% of the total population of the country, numbering 84.51 million (2001 Census). There are 697 tribes notified by the central govt. under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution with certain tribes being notified in more than one state. Article 342 lays down that the President may “by public notification specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes” They were duly specified by order 1950, SRO 510.

Now, how did these tribes originate in India? To gauge the origin, status and nature of tribes in ancient India, essentially reflected in Sanskrit texts, we have first to determine the identity of these tribes and their position in the context of caste-dominated ancient Indian society. Both tribe and caste are loosely applied to a social group. The tribe is defined as “the largest body of people, speaking about what they themselves regard as one language, and have a common language for themselves as well as a sense of solidarity which express itself in regarding other people as strangers.” It differs from caste in as much as the common name does not usually imply occupation. Caste is ideally decided by occupation. According to notes and queries of the Anthropological

Institute, the modern tendency of such tribes is to get themselves transformed into a caste. In fact a tribe is a prospective caste.

In India, tribes or *Adivasis* – the original and first dwellers appear to be pre-Dravidian settlers. Since the dawn of civilization, India was simply swept away by plethora of invasions and induction of small groups or tribes, who finally became submerged with the prevailing social hierarchy. In the first phase the Dravidians conquered the *adivasis* and assimilated them in the main stream of the society. The Aryans did the same thing when crushing and subjugating the indigenous people and finally turning them into *Dāsas* or *Śūdras*, slated to serve the Aryan masters. The society was divided in various fragments leading to the origin of caste hierarchy where women and *śūdras* were relegated to a subservient position. Caste is based on occupation and activities of different sections of people, apply testified in *Gītā* at a subsequent stage –

“cāturvarṇam mayāśṛṣṭam guṇakarmavibhāgāḥ”. (IV/13)

However, the conquest was hard-won as it was severely challenged by the indigenous people. Even the existence of master warrior and hero India was frowned upon. However stiff resistance put up by the indigenous people, denigrated and ridiculed as *asura*, *anāma* etc., - as amply pointed out by Yāska in Nirukta –

“ko’yaṁ vṛtraḥ, megha iti nairuktāḥ, asura iti aitihāsikāḥ.” (II/16)

But beyond the periphery of dominance of the Dravidian and finally Aryan race and subsequent division in society in various substratas – *śūdras* or *dāsas* being relegated to a most abominable position, lived several groups who did not register themselves within the main stream society presumably apprehending loss of their identity and preserving their own culture by all possible means. In the *Brātyastoma* of the Atharvaveda, we come across a section of such segregated people, divorced from the main stream, though attempts to bring them under one umbrella are afoot. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, dated 6th century BCE, we come across a statement emphasizing the existence of several groups of alienated people some of whom have been branded as *dasyu* or trouble maker villains

“tad ye jyāyāṁso, na te kushalaṁ menire. tānanu byājahāra antān baḥ prajñā bhakṣīṣṭeti. ta ete’ndhrāḥ puṇḍrāḥ śavarāḥ pulindā mūtivā ityudantyā vahavaḥ vaiśvāmitrā dasyūnāṁ bhūyiṣṭhāḥ”.
(vol VI/ chap. 33)

In the *Chandogyopaniṣad* we come across a rather peculiar person *sayugvā raikka* – carrier of bullock (4/2/3) who, despite his scholarship and erudition is marked by his indecent demeanour like scratching and itching sores (*gāmāṇāṁ kaṣamāṇam*), indicating thereby his incongruity in the civilized assembly. But more important is the fact that this apparently uncultured man has been described as a dweller of Mahāvṛṣa province which is ill famed for skin disease.

“te hai te raikkapaṇṇā nāma mahāvṛṣesu yatrāsmā uvāsa”.

Can we infer that this particular province *mahāvṛṣa* is designed, for physically sick and socially ostracized people whom we later designate as tribe?

In the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, the prowess of Rāvaṇa, the dominant king of an advanced civilization and the so called monkeys, marked by their strength and magnanimity, because of their exclusion from caste-dominated mainstream social hierarchy and formidable distance from the main land, created by the sea, had been denigrated to the status of uncivilized demons and animals. It is no wonder therefore that whoever created impediment to the smooth governance as per pre-decided notion of the ruler, had been branded as *rākṣasa* or demons destroying the sacrifice and other rituals, favoured by the monarchy. They were battered, crushed and finally thrown out of the society, forcing them to languish either in distant forests or in absolute seclusion from the mainstream. They maintained and preserved with utmost zeal their own culture and individual entity. It may be noted in this context that despite the recognized place of *caṇḍālas* in caste hierarchy, however pitiable it might be, various categories of *mleccha*’s were recognized as *caṇḍālas* by *Amarkoṣa* – “bhedāḥ

kirātaśavarapulindā mlecchajātayaḥ”. Side by side – we come across tribal kingdoms ruled by Naga dynasties in the *Mahābhārata*.

In Dharmaśāstra texts, we come across revealing statements describing an ostracized group of people, branded as *dasyu* and trouble makers. This appears to be a direct reference to particular tribes, locating themselves outside the boundary of so called elitist civilization.

“mukhavāhūrūpatmānām yā loke jātayo vahiḥ/

mlecchavācaścāryavācaḥ sarve te dasyavaḥ smṛtāḥ//” (Manu. X/45)

The ill-fated marginalized people who were outcome of fusion of castes had to face extradition from the civilized society. Trees, crematorium, hills etc. had been, advised as their dwelling places.

caityadrumaśmaśāneṣu śaileṣūpavaneṣu ca/

vaseyurete vijnānā vartayantaḥ svakarmabhiḥ// (Manu. X/50)

Had this been the condition of people in the main stream, the plight of the outcastes can easily be imagined. It is but quite natural that this alienated group of people would prefer to stay in isolation – either in forest or in a deserted place, having common descent, thus giving rise to the existence of individualistic ‘tribe’. That these tribes had to defend themselves from the exploitation of the upper strata is explicit from a revealing verse of *Vāśiṣṭha Dharmaśāstra* (I/6/18).

“kṛṣṇavarṇā yā rāmā ramaṇāyaiva na dharmāyana dharmāyeti.”

(A dark skinned woman is simply meant for enjoyment.)

For the repetition of the phrase ‘*na dharmāya*’ evidently shows that dark-skinned aborigine woman has always been considered as an object of enjoyment for the higher castes.

In the classical Sanskrit Literature, we come across a plethora of *mlecchas*, apparently denoting the existence of tribes. In Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya*, we come across Shiva in the guise of a tribal i.e. Kirata fighting Arjuna. In Śūdraka’s *Mṛcchakaṭika* (act VI), Chandanak is well versed in various *mleccha* languages.

“mlecchajātīyānām anekabhāvābhijnā yatheṣṭaṃ mantrayāmahe”/

He also referred to several *mleccha* races or groups viz. *khama*, *khatti*, *viḍa*, *karṇāt*, *karṇa*, *prāvaraṇa*, *drāviḍa*, *cola* etc.

The *Harṣacarita* of Banabhatta is vibrant with caladeocopic description of indigenous tribal people. In the second ucchāsa of *Harṣacarita*, we come across description of indigenous dwellers of forests side by side with pāśupata and parāśara Brahmanas –

“sarvāmbhorthivelāvanavalayavāsibhiṣca mlecchajātibhiḥ”/

Again here we come across a tribal hero, belonging to Śavara tribe, epitomizing valor and physical strength of tribes with flat nose, thick lips and other physical features –

“hasantamiva taṭaśilāgrathimānaṃ vindhyagireśca, jaṅgamamiva giritaṭa tamālapādapam,
ayaḥsāramiva girervindhyasya tālantam...”

Classical Sanskrit Literature is indeed rich in vivid description of indigenous tribals. In the *Pūrvapiṭhika* of Dandīn’s *Daśakumāracarita*, we come across a dreaded robber *mātaṅga*, a Brahmin by birth, but thrived in the company of the tribal race *pulinda* –

“kirātabalena janapadaṃ praviśya grāmeṣu dhaninaḥ strīrālasahitān ānīya aṭabyāṃ vandhane
nidhāya teṣāṃ sakalaṃ dhanam apaharan ... vyacaram. ... yajnopavītaṃ bhūsurabhāṃ dyotayati.
hetihatibhiḥ kirātārīmanumīyate.”

This is an instance of fusion of elitist and indigenous tribal customs.

Despite general apathy towards the so called aborigines or tribes, dictated by class interest and socio-economic hierarchy, there are instances when respect for the downtrodden or disadvantaged are quite apparent. The comparison between *ārya* and *mleccha* words as presented in Yaska’s *Nirukta* (7th century BCE) or Patanjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* (2nd century BCE) bears ample testimony of

thiscultural amalgamation. In the bhāṣya of Śaṅkara on *Mīmāṃsādarśana*, it has been categorically stated that since *mlecchas* are well versed in catching and nourishing birds, they are the fittest persons to impact training in this particular arena –

“śiṣṭānavatātaṃ yat pramāṇena aviruddhaṃ tad avagamya mānaṃ na nyāyyaṃ tyaktum.
abhiyuktatarāḥ pakṣiṇāṃ poṣaṇe vandhane ca mlecchāḥ.”

This attitude shows that at least some respect in certain quarters for the so called out castes – the tribal populace was not missing. Even today we have a lot of things to learn from our predecessors i.e. the original inhabitants of *Bhāratabhūmi*.

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