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ইন্টারন্যাশনাল বাইলিঙ্গুয়াল জার্নাল অফ  
কালচার, অ্যানথ্রোপলজি অ্যান্ড লিঙ্গুইস্টিক্স

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(সাহিত্য-সংস্কৃতি-নৃত্য)

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## How long the tribes will remain “tribe”?

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### ABSTRACT

This article addresses the very question of applicability of the notion of ‘tribe’ as used in the classical theory of cultural evolution in the hands of Lewis Henry Morgan and Emile Durkheim or in the sense of an early form of political organization to groups of present-day people who are categorized so. The post-colonial discourse on tribe is basically overloaded with the derogatory expression by which such groups of people were stigmatized with the sense of ‘primitive’, ‘jungle’ or ‘uncivilized’ since the era of Euro-American colonial expansion. It is found that as a nation with colonial hangover we have accepted the notion since it is well fitted in India with the model of social hierarchy- the dominant socio-political tool to rule over the underprivileged.

### 1.0 Introduction: Origin

The origin of the term ‘tribe’ dates back to the ancient Rome where there was a term *tribus* that was used to mean the ‘artificial units deliberately instituted for administrative and political purposes’ (Cornell, 1995: 117). The notion became prominent again in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with expansion of the Euro-American colonialism. The regime associated the term ‘tribe’ with the people who were considered to be of ‘primitive order’. In the light of enlightenment position of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the





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notion was equated with, Yapp (1983) observes, the people who were assumed to represent an earlier and 'lower' form of society as opposed to the supposedly higher levels of social, economic and political order. Subsequently, the notion became equated with a political organization as of the barbarians in the colonial encounters.

## 2.0 Evolution and tribe

With the domination of the theories of social evolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, again we find the use of the notion of tribe in the narratives about the so-called 'primitive society' governed by the principles of 'kinship'. Lewis Henry Morgan proposed a hypothetical scheme about social evolution in his *Ancient Society* (1877). With a three-fold sequence of evolutionary stages, viz., savagery, barbarism and civilization, Morgan envisaged parallel movement of progress in technology, family, socio-political organization, ownership of property, and house type. In the domain of socio-political organization Morgan made several categories, viz., promiscuous band, inter-marrying sets of male and female siblings, matriline, phratries, tribes and confederacies. Thus, he used the term 'tribe' to mean a type of political form that was composed of several kinship units called phratries and, thereby, it is distinct from phratries and confederacies. This notion fitted well with the broader scheme of social evolution in the line of unilinear evolutionism that was prevailing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and dominating anthropological thought during its last decades. Maine and McLennan also found an extension of kinship ties as the foundation of tribal society in sharp contrast to the notion of territory as the basis of hierarchical society. Thus change from pre-state tribal society to hierarchical state society is marked with transformation of social organization based on egalitarian kinship system to hierarchical social system.

## 3.0 Tribe and Anthropologists

There was a wide disagreement over the application of the concept of tribe in anthropology, particularly during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Disagreement occurred owing to difficulty in framing up of a universally accepted definition or to its association with 'a primitive or backward





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condition'. Andre Beteille observes that, until 1940s, anthropologists principally concerned with the so-called 'simple, pre-literate, small-scale and isolated' societies in North and South America, the Pacific Islands, Melanesia, Australia and the sub-Saharan Africa (Beteille, 1986: 297). For Sneath, this trend continued till the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike their sociological counterpart, the primary subject of anthropological inquiry was 'tribal society' (Sneath, 2016). The leading figures in anthropology were interested to discover the institutionalized rules of such societies. Their focus was to understand the autonomous wholeness and distinctiveness of cultures. Frantz Boas, for instance, tried to understand the Eskimo perceptions about the colour of water and ice and to study the Northwest Coast languages particularly Kwakiutl (now known as the Kwakwaka'wakw) and Tsimshian. However, anthropologists did not consider the peoples they studied as 'primitive survivals' of the ancestors of modern cultures. This was demonstrated by Boas in his *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) with counter-examples substantiating that the unilinear sequence of human progress was not 'universal'. Likewise, Boas' followers also focused on culture of the simple societies; for instance, Lowie's focus was on the cultures of the Crow, the Winnebago people of Nebraska, the Ojibwa of South east Ontario and the Nootka of British Columbia (1920, 1924, 1935), Radin's on Winnebago autobiographies (1920, 1927), Goldenweiser's on the Iroquois and early cultures (1913, 1937), Leslie Spier's on the Pueblo and other tribes around Puget Sound and in the Southwest (1917, 1928, 1930, 1933) and Wissler's on Dakota, Sioux and Blackfoot peoples (1908, 1912). Similar trend was also found in the works of the European anthropologists; for instances, River's work on the Todas and Melanesians (1906, 1914), Radcliffe-Brown's studies on the indigenes of the Andaman Islands during 1906 to 1908 (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922) and the Australian 'aborigines' during 1910 to 1912 (Radcliffe-Brown, 1910, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1918) and or Malinowski's studies on the Baloma and Trobrianders (1916, 1922, 1926, 1927, 1929, 1935). However, the discipline of anthropology started to look beyond tribe by the 1940s when there were attempts to comprehend the other aspects of civilization. It was Robert Redfield who perhaps for the first time tried to mapping out 'tribe' within the broader framework of civilization (Redfield, 1956).





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#### 4.0 Colonial expansion and the notion of tribe

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the institutionalization of the notion of tribe as an administrative category throughout much of the colonized world, e.g., in Africa and the Indian sub-continent (Ranger, 1983; Southall, 1985). By the time, Durkheimian theory came out with the observation on the tribe as ‘an aggregate of hordes or clan’ (Durkheim, 2013 [1893]: 204). This observation influenced the thinking of the colonial administration. In order to ensure effective colonial administration, the later carried out several exploratory works on the life and culture of the tribal people. The purpose of such efforts was to acquaint the government officials with the life and culture of the tribal people and often resulted in writings on the same. In India, for instance, such efforts were taken by the British administrators like Risley, Dalton, O’Malley, Russel, Campbell, Latham, Thurston and Crooks. The colonial administrators considered tribal peoples as ‘more primitive’ as they ‘represented an earlier, lower form of life, left behind by the march of history and destined to be redeemed and refashioned by the intervention of superior forces’ (Yapp, 1983: 154). The modern India is still found to carry on such colonial hangover. Tribe is still viewed as a separate category of people who are carrying the stigma of being primitive, ‘jungle’ or uncivilized. Thus, the notion is in use with a kind of derogatory overtone with ‘primitive’ or uncivilized. Our state system has miserably failed to see them as the outcome of negligence, isolation, deprivation and subjugation. They have been the occupiers of the bottom layer in the social hierarchy that was created in order to solemnize the monopoly of the ruling category which occupies the upper layers.

If we turn into the structure of Indian society, it is predominantly stratified. This is not only in terms of castes, but also in the line of class, place of origin (i.e., tribal, rural or urban), religion, and the Weberian notion of status group. Stratification comes into effect in a society on the basis of, as Luis Dumont observes, three principles, viz., hierarchy, separation and independence (Dumont, 1970). Dumont’s scheme entails a single structured opposition of the concepts of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ underlying these three principles. Social stratification always involves unequal distribution of goods and services, rights and obligations, and power and prestige. These are all attributes of position, not of individuals, as Littlejohn observes (1972:9). Social stratification, in fact, is a design to withstand





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dominance versus subordination. The poor people, including the people who are designated by the term 'tribe', are the end product of subjugation. I would like to give you one instance. We can observe that alleviation of poverty has been one of the most important development agenda of the government since independence. Late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called upon for *garibi hatao* (i.e., remove poverty) several decades back. Similar schemes are still occupying prominent place in the much-hyped pro-people agenda of the state and union governments in India. The latest example of such scheme is the distribution of subsidized food grains all over the country with its variant forms across the states (e.g., the *Khadyasathi* in West Bengal). But ultimately, we are getting an increasing number of people who are living under poverty. This is 21.92 percent of India's population as per the latest official estimate for 2011-12 following the Tendulkar Committee approach (Government of India, 2014). This is because all such schemes do not aim at making the people self-sufficient, but dependent forever. The end-product of the schemes is well fitted with the grand principles of hierarchy, separation and the anti-thesis of the principle of independence. The tribes and other poor people are not viewed as underprivileged section of people, but as separate category of backward people. So, there is a gap between these people's history in reality and the perceived history about them, which demands a new historiography of such people as foretold by the subaltern studies (for example, Ranajit Guha's criticism of the bourgeois democracy of post-colonial India [Guha, 1998]). Anthropologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were concerned more with cross-cultural diversity. Boas, for example, highlighted the importance of tolerance of diversity to life in a democratic society. But now the so-called sovereign countries are hesitant to accommodate the cultural, particularly religious and ethnic, diversity of their peoples and trying to deal with them through the framework of dominant culture. Have we been matured enough to show respect towards cultural wisdom of the subordinate culture or to their individual political thinking? They are found to losing their voices in the overwhelming dominancy of the larger collectivity.

Is it not, therefore, surprising that after implementation of innumerable economic welfare schemes for tribes and the reservation policy in effect for more than seven decades, there is no critical assessment of the overall economic development strategies and their outcome on the part of the







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State and the Union Governments who have been the implementing authorities of such schemes. Nor there is any attempt to allow the tribes to evaluate the success or failure of the schemes on the basis of their own criteria. We have even failed to comprehend the tribes' concern over improving their economic welfare without losing their political and/or social sovereignty, i.e., control over their own affairs and over the quality of the natural resources. The biggest weak point of modern state system is that it holds the supreme authority to determine everything of the people without taking the people's perception about the reality into confidence.

### 5.0 Then what to do?

The notion of 'tribe' is, therefore, no longer acceptable in the sense Morgan had used. Nor it subscribe to the early Roman categorization. Rather it is, in fact, an administrative categorization created by the colonial administration with some derogatory overtones. In most of the western countries the term tribe is no longer in use or undermined. On the contrary, the term 'indigenous people' (meaning the 'son of the soil') is being used, though it is not without criticism since no man came out of the soil of the earth. But, the term 'tribe' is in use in the countries that are still carrying on the colonial legacy. With sheer disappointment, we are also carrying on that categorization with derogatory underpinning for the people who are distinct only by their alarming poverty (with only a few exceptions that are reaping the benefits of some administrative policies) and rich cultural heritage. With the passing of time, these people have become politically more vulnerable and are found to losing their freedom of choices in connection with their life and culture. It is, therefore, the time to come forward to write the obituary of the term 'tribe' as it is in use now in administrative categorization since it has been a negatively value loaded notion.

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