Adivasi Histories of India: A Review of Historiography

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ABSTRACT

Adivasi constituties an important segment of Indian society. This paper proposes that British colonial rule has brought about higher degree of the interaction between adivasi societies with settled agriculture region. Ever since colonial rule established in India, there existed a friction between adivasis and the state apparatus formulated by the British. This trend unfortunately continues to some extent in postcolonial period. History as a science of the past represents the changes introduced by the British and response exhibited by tribes to them. The main argument of this paper is that the historical representation of tribes by various historical approaches reflects the politico-economic contexts that condition the attitude of Indian nation and society towards tribes. It is this dialectical relationship between past and present that this paper attempts to highlights. In short, this paper documents the evolutionary trajectory of historiography in the domain of tribal history.

Key Words : Tribes, Historiography, Nationalist, Ethnography adivasi

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between tribes and forests has been an important domain of academic, activist and public interests in independent India. The representational pattern of tribes by historians has significantly been conditioned by contemporary politico-economic developments and raise and fall of ideologies. Apparently there are several approaches which documented tribal history in colonial and postcolonial periods in India. I would like to position my argument within the framework articulated by Sivaramkrishan who pronounced that history in south Asia significantly influenced by the contemporary contexts (Sivaramakrishnan, 2009). He in fact suggests that present imposes its design on the past and influence historical narratives of historians. Taking clue from this argument this paper examines the way in which tribal history produced by different approaches in colonial and postcolonial period.

The main objective of this paper is to propose a review of historiography on of tribal history in India. This exercise is useful in tracking the changing priorities of historians in representing the past of tribes and their engagement with modernity from British to the present. Attempt has been made to analyse the various historiographical approaches and their core features in documenting history of tribes in India.

Tribal History as a Conceptual Domain :
Tribal studies as an epistemic structure is very important in the contemporary India on account

of several complicated issues related to tribal society. After 70 years of independence, tribes still remained to be relatively backward in terms of several socio-economic indicators. Here tribal history helps us to track the changes took place in tribal society which were responsible for their underdevelopment and guide us to contemplate what to be done for further development of tribes (Nathan, and Xaxa, 2012).

In the pre-colonial period, tribes are referred to as vanavasi, atavikas, jungla, kiratakas etc. There existed an active interaction between tribal and non-tribal population in India (Chaudhuri, 1990). It was in the form of trade, military and others engagements. Systematic documentation on tribal society and history by using modern methods started with advent of the British colonial rule (Fuchs, 1992). The conflicting relationship between resource and revenue hungry colonial state and tribes was conditioning factor for the pattern of documentation on tribal society. Before 1858, (rule of East India Company) the attitude of the British towards tribes was mainly of oppression with aggression obviously supported by superior combating weapons. After 1858 (Crown rule) the British resorted to creation of ideological apparatus (Althusser, 2008) to control India society in more efficient way (Chon, 2004). This process exercised an impact upon tribes of India by the way of documentation of tribal society, providing employment, installation of governing apparatus and encouragement of non-tribal communities to settle in tribal areas. This ideological intervention in tribal areas compelled the British to undertake documentation of tribal life world.

It is nearly impossible to review historical narratives on tribes in colonial and post colonial India on account of vastness of literature. Some studies however tried to document the representational patterns of tribes in Indian history (Virginius, 1999). To put it in sharply, historiography of tribal history has been dealt by some studies (Banarje, 2016, Bhukya, 2008). At the same time, some studies did attempt to explore the historiographical trends of environmental history in South Asia which had given particular focus on tribal history (Sivaramakrishnan, 2009, Rangarajan, 1996, Dasgupta, 2015, Sinha *et al.*, 1997). This paper proposes that we need to explore the evolutionary trajectory of adivasi histories which are reflective manifestations of the dialogue of historians with past from the point of view of the present. This paper attempts to capture the dialectical relationship between socio-economic context and production of historical narratives on histories of adivasis in India.

Tribes of India :

Tribes in India constitute 8.5% of total population. They are officially known as scheduled tribes and popularly referred to as adivais, vanavasis etc. The Indian Constitution recognised about 645 tribes as scheduled tribes in different parts of India. Article 366(25) of the constitution has defined 'Scheduled Tribes' as 'such tribes or tribal communities or parts or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of this constitution'. By the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, issued by the president in exercise of the powers conferred by Clause (1) of the Article 342 of the constitution of India, 212 tribes have been declared to be scheduled tribes. Gradually the list expanded to include more tribes into the category of scheduled tribes (Archer, 2013). Tribes in India belong to three broad racial stocks namely the Negritos, the Mongoloids and the Mediterranean (Mehta, 2004). They speak different dialects and follow distinctive customs, religion and traditions.

History of tribes in modern India shows their response to the socio-economic and political changes introduced by the British. The response of tribes to the British rule is a complicated domain ranging from revolts, movements, negotiation and accommodation. Apparently one of the

important forms of tribal response to the British rule was eruption of numerous revolts, conflicts and movements took place in British India. R.C. Verma mentions 80 tribal revolts in colonial period (Verma, 2002). Similarly Raghavaiah mentions 71 tribal revolts in India (Ravhavaiah, 1979). These numbers may not exactly be true, but reflects the magnitude tribal unrest in colonial India. It never means to say that only revolts took place in tribal areas spontaneously, rather several social religious reform movements also took place. Some of the famous tribal revolts are as follows: Koli disturbance in Maharashtra (1784-1785), Chauari Movement in Bihar (1795-1800), Chotanagapur tribal revolt 1807-1898, Munda revolts in Bihar, 1820, 1832 and 1867), Bhill revolt in Gujarat 1846, Santhal revolt, 1855, Naga revolt 1879, Rampa revolt, 1879, Birsa Munda Revolt 1890, Bastar tribal movement, 1911, Gond revolt of 1941 in Hyderabad state etc (Shah, 1991). The some of the main reasons for tribal unrest as follows: land grabbing by non tribal communities under the guidance of the British; alienation from forests after passing 1865 and 1878 forest acts; restrictions on shifting cultivation; impositions of tax on cultivation; erosion of their autonomy by administrative apparatus and finally exploitation carried out by both the British and non tribal population by the way of extracting resources of tribal areas (Singh, 2001).

Colonial Ethnographers and Tribal History :

Tribal history as a conceptual domain first took its birth in the writings of colonial ethnographers. Forest ecologies of India and the role they played in shaping the culture and life world of tribes has been highlighted by these studies. Exhaustive documentation of Indian tribal life from north to south and east to western parts of India has been documented. It is not exaggeration to say that each and every tribal community was brought under this documentation. This documentation emerged as one of the important source for subsequent studies. Some of the important ethnographical studies as follow: Crookes (1896), Russell (1915), Hunter (1907), Thrusten (1909), Haimndorf (1943), Elwin (1944) and Risley (1991-92).

The documentation of tribal society by colonial ethnographers was influenced by prevailing ideas on race in Europe at one level and administrative requirements at another level. Creation of the category of uncivilised race gave the British a self proclaimed moral commitment for penetration into tribal areas (Guha, 1999). The colonial ethnographical writings on tribes reflect certain convictions and functional aspects of colonial rule aroused from cultural and racial superiority. Documentation of Indian society in general and tribes in particular was a complicated exercise driven economic, cultural and political reasons of colonial rule. Generally the claims of colonial ethnographers as follows: tribe are degraded and underdeveloped sections of Indian society; they belong to non-aryan indigenous race; they are primitive in terms of socio-economic and cultural aspects: they require civilising mission of the British; they needed to be tamed and brought under modernity process and finally to arrive at better understanding of tribal society to govern it better. The underlying factors that compelled the British to perpetrate into tribal areas were that resource requirements particularly of woods, land for plantations and labour for making plantations. Having these objective with them, aggressive intervention into the tribal was initiated by using both repressive and ideological methods.

Nationalist Ethnographers and Tribal History :

Nationalist intelligentsia did reflect upon the tribal world of India. Nationalist thought emerged as a paradigm of thought in which Indian intellectual operated. They not only denounced the claims of colonial knowledge on Indian society but also attempted to document the society and history

from indigenous culture and tradition. Sarat Chandra Roy who is known as father of Indian ethnography, probably the first Indian trained ethnographer. He has published more than ten well researched books on tribes of east India such as the Mundas, the Oraons, etc (Roy, 1914). Biraj Sarkar Guha, is another prominent ethnographer who has published studies on racial features of India (Guha, 1931). G.S. Gurey is another important scholar who published in tribes of India (Gurey, 1932). These studies by Indian ethnographers tried to change the image of tribes evolved by British. Their propositions broadly as follows: even though tribes are non Aryan tribes, but part of the Hindu culture in explicitly or implicitly and they treated tribal society with sympathy and demanded more robust development for development of tribal society. It has also been suggested that tribes never been isolated as believed by colonial ethnographers, rather tribes are treated as part of integrationist process that was at operation within the framework of Hindu culture. They however also share the ideas of colonial ethnographers such degraded and backward customs of tribes and wilderness associated with them. The nationalist writings in British India did highlight the fact that tribes are undeveloped and required separate effort to develop them which eventually merge them with mainstream society.

The propositions advanced by Indian ethnographers and sociologists in British India on tribal history as follows: tribes never been completely isolated in India; tribes are gradually brought under Brahmanical fold in terms of culture and religious beliefs in Indian history and the approach of integrationist proposed for development of tribes. The historicism of Indian ethnographers aimed at gradually bringing tribes into cultural and nationalist framework of India. Understandably the task before nationalist thought towards tribes was to make them as part of the Indian culture and tradition. The religious cultural framework was identified as a historical process was in operation in per-colonial period which was disrupted by the British rule by the way of encouraging Christian missionaries to convert tribes into Christianity.

Christian Missionaries and Tribal History in India :

Christian missionaries made their inroads into tribal areas after 1800 and their presence became more visible after 1860s. Missionaries undertook activates of education, health service and attempted to change the faith of tribes to Christianity. The entry of Christian missionaries resulted in documentation of tribal life and history by some of the missionary activists in different parts of India. The historical framework that was being used by missionaries was similar to that of colonial ethnographers if not the same. Tribes are represented as Dravidians who were distinctively different from Aryanised Hindus in terms of culture, faith, and traditions. They were represented as animist driven by superstitions. Practices such as human sacrifice, animal sacrifice are depicted as inherent features of tribal life. At the same time attempt has been made by them to magnify the social life of tribe as degraded and critically require constructive reform process. Understandably, these historical narratives put forward to justify their engagement with tribes and reformist agenda that was executed with the aim to prepare them from conversion. Particularly, the Chotanagpur region became a centre of missionary activity (Kujur, 2007, Bara, 2007)). Hoffman, a German Christen missionary brought about exhaustive volumes on life of the Mundas (Hoffman, 1931). Bodding passionately documented the folk tales of the Santhals to understand their socio-cultural practices (Bodding, 1925). In north-eastern part of India Christian missionaries deeply penetrated and exercised significant impact upon socio-cultural aspects (Sangma, 1987). The missionaries and colonial rule in fact worked if not same but similar objective to that of colonial rue in case of tribes of south India i,e civilising uncivilised (Phillip, 2002). In fact some of the recent studies also carried out this

framework to assess the impact on Christian missionaries on tribes of India (Daniel, 2012).

Tribal History in Independent India :

Tribal society and its history continued to receive the attention of historians who are placed in different academic departments in India in independent India. Particularly tribal revolts against British rule have been drawn in the narratives left wing historians who are critical of development pattern implemented in India after independence. This approach is also influenced by the search for revolutionary consciousness prevailed in the oppressive sections of India. The works of A.R. Desai represent a classic example of this trend. His books *Social Background to Indian National Movement* (1948) and *Peasant Struggles in India* (1978) graphically depicts the way different tribal movements fought against the British and non tribal communities in different parts of India (Desai, 1978, 1948). Collective action in the form of movements, revolts which questioned the exploitative and oppressive forces received the attention of scholars. In this context, tribal movements received keen interests as they represent quest and aspiration for exploitation free and egalitarian society (Shah, 1992). Raghavaian (1971) provides exhaustive documentation on tribal revolts in Andhra Pradesh. M.S.A. Rao's *Social Movements in India*, (1984) included several papers on tribal revolts in different parts of India.

Nationalist Marxist historians did give importance to tribal movements and their role in fighting the hegemony of the British. Bipan Chandra in his classic interpretation of Indian national movement mentions tribal revolts as symptomatic manifestation of protest against systematic exploitation of tribes by the colonial economic process (Chandra, 1982). Sumit Sarkar showed more sympathetic consideration to tribal movements and treated them as voices from below in resisting the exploitive paradigm instituted by the British in controlling resources of India (Sarkar, 1995). This approach however treated tribal movements as part of response of Indian society exhibited towards colonial rule and did not explore the peculiar features tribal protest and their claims for better life.

We also have anthropologically oriented tribal histories by historians and anthropologists. K.S. Singh has published extensive literature on tribal society and movements and history in India. His studies reflect a nice blend of scholarly, activist and administer approaches towards tribal movements and history. His three volume set tribal movements in British India is indeed a valuable contribution to the history of tribes in modern India (Singh, 1982, 1983 and 1998). The main underplaying theme in the narratives of historians in independent India was that to assess the changes unleashed by the British in the tribal areas and thereby proposing more sensitive measures for development of tribes in order to moderate the revolt tradition that often exhibited by tribes in British India. At the same time to evolve an ideological and intellectual apparatus for penetration of the state apparatus into tribal areas.

While left historians mainly focus on the revolutionary potential of tribal revolts as a dissent to the exploitative mode of production instituted by the British, nationalist Marxists historians represented tribal revolts as symptomatic reflections of dissent voices from marginalised communities against oppressive colonial order. Tribal revolts were weaved with the nationalist narrative of fight by all sections of India against the British for freedom. Anthropologically oriented historian tried to understand the world of tribes and thereby proposes certain models for development of tribes without displacing them from the traditional life. All these approaches tried to capture the tensions within tribal areas generated by the changes introduced by the British.

Subaltern Studies and History of Tribes :

The approach of subaltern studies has brought about an alternative approach to study histories of marginalised sections. This approach aspires to document the non elitist histories of socio-economically marginalised communities. This attempt has been aimed at recognising the engagement of marginalised communities with modern Indian history in general and national movement in particular. Such attempt is seen as necessary to expand the Indian nationhood as a notional idea to physical and social margins of India. In the first volumes of subaltern studies (1982) Ranajit Guha defined who is subaltern in the following words: 'anyone who is subordinated in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office or in any other way', He further says that subaltern studies focus on socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of subaltern groups to highlight their contribution to nation building. Following the modal of emancipation of subaltern class, subaltern studies approach attempted to capture the potentiality of subaltern's negation to hegemonic domination of both British and Indian bourgeoisie.

Subaltern studies approach propose that parallel to the nationalist movement, there exists a movement by subaltern classes against oppression which has not been documented by existing studies. Forest based tribal movements received particular attention of this approach. Tribal revolts and movements also received the particular attention of subaltern historians. Basically subaltern approach attempted to document the consciousness and strategies of dissent manifested in several forms such as revolt, movements, attitudes etc. Davind Arnold has documented the consistent dissident of tribal communities against the intervention of colonial state in forest areas of Andhra region (Arnold, 1982). Tanikia Sarkar elegantly brought about the politics of Santhal tribal movements for justice and assertion (Sarkar, 1985). Swapan Das Gupta's account of adivais assertion in Mindapur shows how subaltern historians are interested to document the oppressive consciousness and strategies of tribes (Dasgupta, 1985). Hardiman's study of Bhills of Gujarat is a classic example of historical documentation of politics of tribes and their vision for justice (Hardiman, 0000). Ramachandra Guha's study on forest based communities and their engagement with colonial forest policies in Uttrakhand highlights the way tribes able to trouble colonial state with their diversified strategies (Guha, 1985).

Undoubtedly, subaltern approach to Indian history popularised the histories of tribes and provided them a fresh light to wider audience. The engagement of tribes with the changes that were introduced by the British received attention of subaltern historians. The following points in fact received particular attention: autonomy of tribal engagement with colonial moderanity; the strategies of tribes in resisting the oppressive regime instituted by the British; the visions and perceptions of tribes for their future and finally contribution of tribes in resisting colonial rule and modern India. The criticism alleged against subaltern studies is that it did not capture the autonomy of tribal movements as it claimed and in fact remained within the framework of nationalism. Penetrating ethnographic studies have not been conducted by them to assess the dynamics of tribal movements and their response to the oppressive forces belongs to colonial and native elements.

Environmental History and Tribes of India :

Writings on environmental history appear in early 1980s and gradually evolved into a distinctive sub-field of history discipline. As a discipline, environmental history mainly focuses on human engagement with forests, water, soils, wild life, seasons etc. But in India, it has mainly concentrated on British intervention in management of natural resources in general and forests in particular. This attention was obviously influenced by the conflicts over access to forest resources between tribes

and forest departments in 1970s. Tribal history emerged as an important narrative theme in the discourse of environmental history. The apparent reason for this development is that most of environmental history writings focused on forest history of British India. The subsequent section deals with how environmental history writings represented tribes in India.

American environmental history writings particularly of Murry Bookchin's Our Synthetic Environment (Bookchin, (1975) and Rachel Carson's The Silent Spring, (Carson, 1962) created not only a critique of capitalist exploitation of nature but also romantic perception on the pre-colonial past as ecologically harmonious. These activist visions are furthered by academicians such as Donald Worster's Wealth of Nature created discourse and vocabulary for dualism in representational pattern of environmental history in the form of eco-friendly pre-colonial past, preceded by destructive colonial period and its presence in the contemporary times (Wroster, 1994). This narrative travelled to South Asia and emerged as standard framework of pioneering environmental history. The writings of Vanddana Shiva document the ecologically prudent tribal communities, managing living resources with prudent pattern of resource regulated by cultural and social practices (Shiva, 1988). Madhiv Gandhil explores the document sacred grove of India as a symbol of indigenous ecological wisdom (Gadgil, 1975).

Ramachandra Guha proposes that environmental history in India is a documentation of what one age has done unworthy to other. Following this line, Gadgil and Guha attempted to document the socio-ecological conflicts over access to resources in British India. Subsequently they have published an important book which emerged as popular book on environmental history is *This Fissureland; an ecological history of India*. This book proposes ecological background to Indian history within the framework of Marxist notion of alienation of man from access to nature (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). They have claimed that colonial state penetrated into tribal areas to chanalise the resources to colonial economic process immediately and global capitalist exploitation process in the long run. Similar exploitation displacement continued in independent India as claimed by some studies (Baviskar, 2004). It is this resource hungry and exploitative state apparatus that was responsible for alienation of tribal communities from access to their traditional life evolved over several centuries. Disruption of this harmonious relationship between tribes and nature according to Guha is the root cause of ecological problems in India.

Inspired by macro level studies, several fascinating studies are being carried out by scholars on impact of forest policies on tribes in different regions of India. In case of Himalayan region it has been proposed that mountain based tribal society was exploited by the British colonial rule (Singh, 1998, Agrwal, 2004, Alam, 2008). Western part of India and their tribal and nomadic regions had been explored by some studies (Skariya, 1999, Kavoori, 1999, Kothiyal, 2016). Eastern Indian forest based tribal ecology has been explored by some studies. It has been proposed that forest policies have created base for colonial state for rigorous intervention of state apparatus and its penetration in tribal areas (Saikia, 2011, Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, and Chakrabarti, 2009). If not the same but similar studies on history of forest based tribes have been carried out by historians in central provinces (Rangarajan, 1994, Guha, 1999, Prasad, 1998). In case of South India, several fascinating studies on impact of colonial forest policies on forest based tribal economy and their response have been carried out (Saravanan, 1998, Murali, 1984, Menon, 2004, Sabrwal and Lele, 2004, Ravikumar, 2010). The core features of this approach as follows: forest constitute a critical resource base to tribal society: in the second of 19th century colonial state initiated the commercial exploitation of forest resources; this was done with systematic legal and administrative mechanism; forest policies resulted in unprecedented intervention of state apparatus into everyday life of tribes;

this friction between forest rules and tribes resulted in consistent tussle between colonial authorities and forest department and forest policies accelerated the process of integration of tribes with colonial economic and governance system.

Postcolonial theory and tribes :

Inspired by the trend of linguistic turn to history in general and discourse analysis in particular tribal histories acquired more narrative orientation. This approach acquired popularity in the context of three process: articulation of identity based assertive movements, ascendency of extremist movement in some pockets of tribal India and finally penetration of market forces in unprecedented way. The main objective of this approach is to capture the evolution of epistemic representation of tribes to evolve effective controlling measures at one level and capturing the tribal voices that went on shaping their identity and destiny. Contrary to the claim of colonial and nationalist historiography that tribes are simple and primitive, some studies proposed the ability of tribes in accommodating the changes introduced by the British (Pati, 2011). Using the framework of micro history, some studies attempted to document the long term changes took place to in the socio-economic condition of single tribal community (Bhukya, 2010, 2016). The discourse analysis has been used to incorporate the voices of tribes in the narratives of historians. The main objective of this attempt is to capture the vision and aspirations of tribes for becoming agents of transformation in their lives (Dasputpa, 2011). This trend also shows the attempt of historians to retrieve the visions that tribes envisaged for changing their lives and aspirations to became authors of their destiny (Carrin and Luche, 2011 Dasgupta and Basu, 2011).

The tribal history influenced by post colonial theory proposes that the epistemological structure on tribal history evolved by non-tribal agencies to justify their claims over tribal society. This process according to this approach laid foundations for governance, policy making and developmental pattern. The fact this approach emphasis is that historical representation of tribes influenced by asymmetrical power relations and the voices of tribes on their history nullified. It this knowledge ruptures that post colonial theory mostly concern about.

Conclusion :

As suggested by environmental historian Sivaramakrishnan there has always been a dialectical relationship between dialectical relationship between context and text. Similarly history is also a product of context which has its own discourse and purpose. This paper attempted to offer an evolutionary trajectory of historiography of Indian tribes and various dimension of it. This paper suggest that history is not only a past mirror of constructed by the present context but also a catalyst of changes that tribal society is desperately need and often a guide to the things to be done for best results in the domain of tribal society in India. Undoubtedly historian needs to pay keen attention to the historical consciousness and narratives that tribes themselves possess on their history and existence. Ironically, mainstream society even today share all prejudice on tribal society. It is the rational and unbiased history that is capable of shattering the myth on tribal society and provides a realistic and progressive knowledge which is foundational principle for sustainable transformation tribal society in India.

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