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ARTICLE

Contested Tribes: The Subjectivity of Tribe and State in India

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Abstract

One of the daunting issues in Indian democracy is the complex relationship between the state and tribes. The relationship is known for its integration policy and affirmative action, which is the largest in the world; on the other hand, it is marred by dispossession, contravention of tribal rights, and sometimes state-sponsored violence. Tribes have diverse experiences of the Indian state, which significantly reflect their histories and traditions. To begin with, the founders of the Indian Constitution held backwardness and isolation from mainstream society as characteristics of tribes. However, those communities designated as Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution included communities that once were what anthropologists call a state society. The idea of a tribe in the post-independence period has become more complex as some ethnic communities associated with dynasties and states in the past are demanding tribal status. This development in the present has come at the cost of ethnic conflicts, intractable identity politics, and overstretched affirmative action policies. This article delves into the contestation of tribality in India, examining the relationship between tribe and state.

Keywords: India; state; tribe

1. Anthropological concepts in public life

In India, terms such as aboriginal tribe, Adivasi, Vanvasi, Indigenous people, and Scheduled Tribe (ST) are loosely and synonymously identified with the word "tribe."[1] However, each term has a long-contested history, reflecting the complexity of the Indian public life. In the Indian state of Assam, a state in North-East India, home to diverse ethnic communities where I have carried out ethnographic studies, the usage of kindred terms such as Adivasi, tribe, Indigenous people, and ST in sociopolitical life is exceedingly contextual, deeply rooted in the history of the communities and their complex interactions in contemporary politics.

Assam witnesses regular community protests, at times marred by violence. These distinctive mass protests involve six ethnic communities that demand the status of ST under the Indian Constitution, namely Ahom, Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Matak, and Tea tribes. The government strives to limit the expansion of affirmative action, which goes hand in hand with the recognition of ST status, without alienating the vote bank of the communities

[1] Sharma 2018, 75.

demanding inclusion in the schedule. The dilemma of defining who gets ST status is greater still for social scientists studying communities in India. For one, within the broad category of the Tea tribes that are designated as Other Backward Class (OBC) in Assam are communities such as the Bhumij, Gond, Oraon, Munda, and Santhal, which identify themselves as Adivasis.[2] These Adivasis are synonymously called "tribes" and included in the ST list in their original states. What triggered this research is that large communities perceived as state builders, such as the Chutia, Tai-Ahom, and Koch-Rajbongshi, and those who had established kingdoms of their own in the pre-colonial period, such as the Moran and Matak, are engaging with "tribal" identity along a complex politics of ethnicization in present-day Assam.

The anthropological concept of tribe might have possibly run its course, but the notion of *tribality* is internalized differently by interested parties and infused with new meanings in contemporary Indian public life. The crux of this article is seeing *tribality* as an expression of indigeneity amid a perceived threat from the "other," a mechanism of resource struggle, and a mode of articulating political identity in a remarkably diverse country like India. This study looks at tribe and state as types of sociopolitical integration to shed light on public life in contemporary India. The conceptual development, data organization, and narratives are tied to the anthropological discourses of tribe and state, which I argue have an important bearing on the usage of concepts such as indigeneity, Adivasi, and ST in India. This article does not seek to interrogate each concept on its own, but rather to show the contextual usages of these terms in public life as communities navigate the labyrinth of identity politics and resource struggle.

Assam's ethnic communities illustrate how the concept of indigeneity is internalized in everyday public life. In national parlance, "Adivasi" is a collective term used to refer to the "earliest inhabitants" of India, who are currently considered representatives of "tribes" in anthropological literature, and from the perspective of policymaking are the object of the constitutionally mandated category of "ST."[3] However, in Assam, Adivasi is a self-referential term used only by certain communities having historical connections with the Adivasi of Central and Eastern India. Paradoxically, the Adivasis of Assam, who are not considered "Indigenous people" of that state, are included within the generic "Tea tribe," and are demanding ST status in Assam, creating a different discourse of indigeneity or what Adivasi activists in other parts of the country prefer to call *Adivasiyat*.[4]

"Tribal" is a self-referential term employed by the communities designated as ST for collective mobilization, distinguishing themselves from the "non-tribals." These "tribals" of Assam are opposed to the idea of Tea tribes, including the Adivasi groups, inclusion into the ST list. The tribal people of the eight states in North-East India identify Adivasis with the tribes or Indigenous populations in the so-called mainland India. Scholars and social activists from North-East India, myself included, hold a view that the tribal people in the North-East cannot be equated with the Adivasis in the mainland, given the latter's singular history of oppression, deprivation, and marginalization. The stance of these native intellectuals does not contradict Adivasiyat or indigeneity claims of the tribals in India, but their disengagement from the term "Adivasi" has to do with the varying experiences of tribes under both the colonial and Indian state taking regional histories into consideration.[5]

[2] Munshi 2015; Srivastava and Chaudhury 2009, 80; Xaxa 1999b.
[3] Nixon 2025, 9.
[4] Mishra and Chandra 2024, 57.
[5] Srivastava 2021, 6.

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Assam presents an interesting case for researchers studying tribal communities since the concepts of indigeneity, tribe, and ST are highly contextual, needing a grounded interpretation of ethnic identity politics and struggle for resources in everyday public life. Arguably, the notions of tribe, Adivasi, and indigeneity are more or less interchangeable in Central India, Eastern India, and South India, whereas the case of North-East India in general, and Assam in particular, is far more complex. For example, the Tai-Khamti people who entered Upper Assam in the second half of the eighteenth century from Upper Burma are anthropologically regarded as a tribe and are included in the central ST list, but because of their late arrival in Assam, their claim of indigeneity in the state remains highly contentious.[6] Notably, this tenacious "Buddhist tribe," who proved a thorn in the side of the British rulers, has been associated with influential dynasties and has a long history as state builders.[7]

I join the ranks of anthropologists and sociologists in India who prefer the term "ethnic group" or "community" to that of tribe, but scholars do not exist in a vacuum. We scholars from "tribal" communities in North-East India belong to self-identifying communities; as part of a larger group, we articulate our interests in the usage of the word tribe. This condition has reinforced the ubiquity of the term tribe in public life, though professional academics regard the concept of tribe as outdated. The North East Indigenous People's Forum is one of many "Indigenous peoples" non-governmental organizations that have emerged in recent times seeking global alliances and recognition by employing the idiom and discourse of Indigenous rights in their struggle against the Indian state and "other" dominant groups.[8] Conspicuously evident in the Indigenous peoples' forums in Assam and other North-Eastern states is the non-inclusion of the "Adivasis" of Central and Eastern India who had come to Assam in the second half of the nineteenth century as indentured laborers in the tea gardens established by British colonial rulers.[9] The dominant ethnic communities staking a claim as Indigenous peoples of North-East India include the Tai-Ahoms of Assam, who entered the Assam valley in the thirteenth century from northern Myanmar, and the Meiteis of the Indian state of Manipur, who had established powerful kingdom-states in the Brahmaputra valley and the Imphal valley, respectively. Noticeably, these two influential ethnic communities are constructing a narrative of tribal identity for inclusion in the central ST list and are conveniently reckoning the anthropological notion of "tribe" in the process.

I propose a critical inquiry into the concepts of tribe and state to shed light on the notion of *tribality* among the communities and stakeholders engaged with the idea to various ends. I draw heavily from historical anthropology and tribal ethnographies studies to examine the dynamics of a tribe and state in India. I have leaned into my disciplinary study to problematize the concept of "tribe" since the discourse of Adivasi, Indigenous people, and other kindred concepts hinges on it. The analysis delves into the existing literature on Indian tribes; however, this study is grounded in a decade-long ethnographic engagement with the tribes of North-East and Eastern India. In particular, I incorporate data from my ethnographic fieldwork carried out intermittently between 2022 and 2024 in Upper Assam. The data organization and analysis pertain mostly to the concept of tribe and state, but this article underscores related concepts to drive home the debates surrounding the state and tribe in contemporary India.

[6] Gogoi 1971, xvii–xviii.
[7] Ibid., xxx.
[8] Karlsson and Subba 2006, 2–3.
[9] Guha 1977.

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Consistent in the arguments is a positioning of tribe and state as levels of sociopolitical integration, examining how ethnic communities in post-independence India negotiate these two categories to assert their tribality or construct new tribal identities. The arguments do not view tribe and state as evolutionary stages of societal development, but rather look at the sociopolitical structure and cultural integration underpinning these two pivotal concepts.

Tribe and state are not mutually exclusive; rather, there are varying degrees of interactions between these two social formations. I argue that communities' articulation of tribality and indigeneity in public life takes place through an interplay of tribe and state. The main objective of this article is to draw attention to the complex relationship between tribe and state, which shapes cultural change, affirmative action policies, identity politics, and political mobilization in contemporary India.

The existing works examining the relationship between tribe and state are largely the historical ethnographies of tribal communities, delineating the nature and modes of interaction between these two social formations. In a significant work on tribe and state, Sumit Guha posits tribe as an inconstant political formation marked by an acephalous character and its opposition to centralized hierarchies, appearing or disappearing in response to state weakness.[10] Ajay Skaria points out the historical processes where tribes were perceived to be outside the civilization, state, and even peasantry.[11] Nandini Sundar's work on Bastar in Central India highlights the overlap between tribal polity and medieval state, where the former's social networks and ritual spaces give legitimacy to the latter.[12] In his significant study on state formation in tribal society, K. S. Singh argues that the conceptual precedence should be placed on the dynamics of state formation instead of the Sanskritization of tribal chiefs, which is a cultural aspect or consequence of the former.[13] In his analysis of tribe and civilization, André Béteille makes a distinction between evolutionary and historical approaches, arguing for historical ones in the Indian context as he emphasizes the co-existence of different social formations within a given time and space.[14]

This article is an act of public humanities that centers the authority of Indigenous intellectual debates and Indigenous intellectuals like me, a Naga scholar. A conversation about ST in India interrogates the contours of tribality as much as those of states in public life. Through the analysis of India, it sheds light on the complicated and contextual framing of tribes and states everywhere, showing how one defines the other and how they relate to one another in political contexts that are constantly shifting. Public humanities is a site of struggle, where contentious notions of borders, belonging, and authority are discussed. This article shows how the dynamics of tribe and state vary from one region to another and how they subvert notions of stable borders. This is why Andrew Canessa and Manuela Picq analyze indigeneity as a political identity that is relational to and co-constitutive of modern states.[15] My research contributes an Indian perspective to show how these two interrelated categories that shape public life are porous, contentious, and contextual. In fact, many communities today are navigating both inside and outside tribality in their interactions with India's state.

[10] Guha 2021.
[11] Skaria 1999.
[12] Sundar 1997.
[13] Singh 1985.
[14] Béteille 1986.
[15] Canessa and Picq 2024.

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The discussion focuses on tribe and state as levels of sociopolitical integration with special reference to India's post-independence period. It examines the implications of their interactions on identity politics and national integration in India's public life. In this article, I first delineate the concepts of tribe and state, examining the historical development of the concepts and their modes of interaction, and considering how communities have internalized these two interrelated concepts and how scholars of Indian society have conceptualized them. I then shed light on the role of colonial institutions and practices, which have significantly shaped the knowledge production and intellectual traditions of classifying society and peoples in India. The argument in this section highlights the role of British colonialism in shaping tribal policies and rendering social and political complexity in the classification and self-identification of tribes. In the last section, this article analyzes the role of the Indian state in shaping and maintaining the notion of tribality in the post-independence period. It examines how the constitutional provisions and safeguards have set off a new narrative and conception of tribes in post-independence India, giving special emphasis to the emergent concept of ST, which has rendered the concept of tribe more complex and contested.

2. The representation of tribe and state in India

In Indian scholarship, the prevailing view is that "tribe" is a colonial construct derived mainly from the expediency of census operations, not based on ethnographic rigor and sociological considerations.[16] Besides the colonial reports, it was the administrator-scholar, H. H. Risley, who gave one of the earliest operational definitions of tribe in the Indian context, labeling tribes as a collection of groups of families bearing a common name, claiming common descent, speaking the same language, or claiming to occupy a definite tract of a country.[17] To a great extent, Risley's conceptualization of tribe became integral to the anthropological and sociological imagination, guiding ethnological studies and census enumerations. Notwithstanding the debates on tribes, anthropologists and sociologists in the post-independence period viewed tribes as a social type, largely opposed to caste, with attributable cultural features and a level of sociopolitical integration, which are fast transforming due to modernization and unprecedented cultural contact. However, scholars share a consensus that the sociopolitical complexities often render the definition of tribe problematic in India.

For conceptual clarity, let me outline the concepts of tribe and state employed in the present work. A state in this context refers to a level of society marked by a centralized authority, an elite ruling class, an organized military, a non-kin-based social organization, and the state's authority resting on territorial control.[18] There is no singular definition of tribe, but I have used the term to refer to a type of social formation without a centralized authority, an absence of specialized occupational groups, a society that is lineage-based, and having a relatively distinct culture. The concept of tribe in this context is more or less an "ideal" type, which I have derived from the anthropological conception.[19] Tribes are by no means a static entity, making this social type more predisposed to change.[20] In addition, what I have not included in the discussion is the onerous question of when a community or a social group stops becoming a tribe, but what is clearly delineated in my argument is the distinction

[16] Atal 2016, 27–28; Béteille 1986, 299; Xaxa 2008, 1.
[17] Risley 1915, 62.
[18] Fukuyama 2011, 80–81; Guha 2021.
[19] Srivastava 2008, 29.
[20] Guha 2021.

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between tribe and state as levels of sociopolitical integration: a state cannot be called a tribe and vice versa.[21] If an erstwhile state society during the colonial period claims a tribal status in the present, this is primarily a contention against the Indian state, which will take the anthropological analysis into a realm of intersectionality and identity politics.

The historical data and ethnographic research corroborate the difficulty of placing communities in India on a well-defined evolutionary scheme of societal and cultural evolution. Béteille argues for a historical approach that emphasizes a particular framework of time and space to underscore the co-existence of different stages of societies with regard to cultural development and sociopolitical integration.[22] The practice of dividing human societies into four evolutionary levels has been the domain of anthropologists and historians. There are scholars in the post-independence period who have studied Indian society, subscribing to the idea of social formations or levels of sociopolitical integration.[23] Their writings do not argue that every society had passed through the different levels of sociopolitical integration —namely band, tribe, chiefdom, and state—but that different types of social formations had existed side by side, comprising the larger Indian society.[24]

The Indian social reality shows that the notion of tribe encompasses a wide range of social formations, economic systems, and political organizations, while the idea of the state has been more or less fixed, referring to a particular type of sociopolitical integration.[25] In ancient India, tribes like the Bhils are mentioned in the epic literature, religious texts, and the court chronicles of the earliest state society, portraying them as wild and primitive.[26] Notably, the early treatise on the state by Kautilya and Megasthenes mentions tribes as wild races, living in the forests and mountains.[27] The presumed "uncivilized" nature of the tribes or their subhuman condition was perceived as a corollary of their existence outside the state society. The prevailing idea in Indian society is that tribes are those people who were pushed to the remote jungles or inaccessible hilly regions by a state or a dominant community. The pre-colonial historical records on the tribes are scanty, but the existing literature shows that some tribes were relatively part of a state society; some were outside the state, but in the sphere of civilizational influence; and some were isolated from the state society. However, the popular view is that tribes have always been within the sphere of civilizational influence, meaning within the reach of a state. In this context, the Indian sociologist, G. S. Ghurye, argued that tribes are "backward Hindus" who were gradually assimilating into a Hindu state society, but "this old process of assimilation was upset" by British colonialism.[28]

The idea of an interaction between tribes and Islamic states in India remains tenuous since there is little research on it.[29] Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the relationship between tribes and Islamic states in history has largely evaded the interests of nationalist anthropologists and sociologists whose conceptualization of an Indian state or civilization has been primarily Hindu. The existing historical records point to migrating populations such as the Pashtun tribes, with their characteristic segmentary lineage system, from

[21] Atal 2016, 48.
[22] Béteille 1986, 298.
[23] Béteille 1986; Guha 2021; Kosambi 1956, 24–30; Singh 1985.
[24] Service 1962.
[25] Vidyarthi and Rai 1976; Xaxa 2008, 4–5.
[26] Varma 1978; Vidyarthi and Rai 1976, 25–33.
[27] McCrindle 1877, 80–81; Trautman 2023.
[28] Ghurye 1959, xi.
[29] Guha 2015.

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Central Asia transitioning to a state society in parts of the Indian subcontinent, or the kingdoms or states of present-day tribes like the Chero and Gond collapsing due to the onslaught of the Islamic states.[30] Undeniably, the most significant interaction between tribe and state in Indian history happened during British colonialism. To a great extent, it was the interaction with the colonial state that had shaped, transformed, and consolidated the idea and imagery of tribes in India.

The historical records and ethnographic data show that not all tribes have been isolated from the state; there were small-scale societies, which were isolated from the state society, while some communities identified as tribes, or their subgroups, had built kingdoms and states. Notwithstanding, the peculiarity of the Indian tribal situation is the presence of large tracts of uplands or pockets of forestlands inhabited by remarkably diverse communities, providing a basis for scholars to argue that some tribes had existed outside state societies and civilizations.[31] According to James Scott's "Zomia thesis," the separation of tribe and state appears clear-cut in north-eastern India, where the characteristic feature of the hill people has been their condition of statelessness.[32] Zomia, coined by the Dutch scholar van Schendel, refers to the upland peoples of Southeast Asian mainland massif covering north-eastern India, Southeast Asian nations, and four provinces of China that have not yet been fully incorporated into the nation-states; here, Scott's argument that hill peoples flee the state-making project coheres with the conventional idea of tribes being pushed to the margins by the state.[33] However, the Indian situation reveals that the hill tribes were not antipathetic to the state-making process. The formation of state societies in the second millennium of the Common Era in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys in India's North-East hints at a strong possibility of hill tribes migrating to the plain areas to build kingdoms or take over existing states.

In general, communities identified as tribes in India had existed at the margins of a state, intersecting with different spheres and agencies of a state. Many tribes had come under the influence of a state religion like Hinduism, though they were removed from a state society; some tribes had maintained relations with a state due to their link with the market economy, while some tribes had faced the military dimension of a state when considered an impediment to the state's interests. The prevalent belief is that tribes in India had suffered the most when they were subsumed into the expansionism of a colonial state, rendering them vulnerable to state actors such as petty officials, unscrupulous traders, and money lenders.[34]

The complexity is that some present-day tribes, or a subgroup of them, which the colonial authorities labeled as tribes, enjoyed the heritage of a dwindled state in the form of land and social capital, or they had relics of the state in the form of monuments, an enervated Hinduized ruling class, and even titular kings. In the undivided Assam, Central India, Deccan region, and parts of Northern India, there were tribes such as the Kacharis, Bhumij, Jaintia, Chero, and Gonds who founded kingdoms and states; notably, the Indigenous inhabitants like the Dimasa, Chutia, Tripuri, Koch-Rajbongshi, and Raj Gond, who founded kingdoms and built states, solicited the Brahmin priests from northern India and elsewhere, who in return helped the ruling class stake a claim as Hindu warrior castes.[35] By comparison, tribes that

[30] Barth 1959; Caroe 1958; Fürer-Haimendorf 1948, 1; Singh 1985, 31.
[31] Chophy 2022, 179–80; Pau 2020, 8–9.
[32] Scott 2011, 13–16.
[33] Scott 2011, ix; van Schendel 2002.
[34] Elwin 1939, 511; Ghurye 1959, 79–80.
[35] Singh 1985, 36.

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were earlier a state had greater political dividends and considerable human capital in the post-independence period. Of the Gonds, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf writes, "No aboriginal people of India has attained greater prominence on the political scene of past centuries than the large group of tribes commonly known by the generic term Gond... a ruling race equal in power and material status to many contemporary Hindu princes."[36] The internal contradiction is that many of these communities did not forgo their caste affirmation, beliefs, and pride as a warrior caste with the collapse of their kingdoms, but they began to assert their tribal identity in post-independence India.

The case of the Koch-Rajbongshis with their ancient capital in the present-day Cooch Behar, West Bengal, presents an interesting case of the dynamics of tribe, caste, and state in the post-independence period. Spread across the Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal, and the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh, the Koch-Rajbongshis comprise the largest Scheduled Caste community in West Bengal; they are identified as an ST in Meghalaya, and in Assam, they are classified as OBC, making a political demand for the ST status. In addition, the Koch-Rajbongshis have a surviving memory of a powerful ruling dynasty embroiled in a political movement demanding a separate Kamatapur state, which will incorporate the areas of the erstwhile Koch-Rajbongshi kingdom, spanning the states of Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar.[37]

3. How colonial agencies shaped the idea of tribe and state

The colonial classification of tribes in India is noticeable for merging the different types of sociopolitical integrations, such as band, tribe, chiefdom, and state. It is important to note that the colonial classification of tribes was based on features like "primitive" cultural traits, socio-economic backwardness, and political disenfranchisement, paying less attention to the social formations and historical backgrounds of the communities.[38] Similarly, in the postcolonial period, the anthropological study of tribe and state as levels of sociopolitical integration, which was popular in Africa and the Middle East, did not gain traction in India. This compounding of social formations complicated the definition of a tribe since the same term covered communities like the Pathans of the North-West Frontier Province with segmentary lineage system comparable to African tribes like the Nuer and communities such as the Chero, Raj Gond, and Tripuri with vivid memory of a state, which was bolstered by the presence of ruling class and state symbols such as forts, temples, and royal estates.

The administrator-scholar Edward Gait contends that it was the ruling class who fought for supremacy and expansionism, but scholars in the post-independence period have pointed out that the success and longevity of a state depended on the former tribal polity and kinship networks, which implies that the formation and continuity of a kingdom state were not the prerogative of the ruling families alone.[39] Arguably, the non-separation of tribe and state also confounded the anthropological dilemma of tribe and caste since in the Indian context, communities that formed a state were inevitably assimilated into the caste fold. The Indian ethnographic scenario reveals that communities removed from the state society strongly exhibited the social and cultural features that anthropologists label as tribes. The dynamics of tribe and state was consequential in the post-independence Indian society, since the state, as an advanced level of sociopolitical integration, would prove a viable source of political

[36] Fürer-Haimendorf 1948, 1.
[37] Das 2013.
[38] Xaxa 1999b.
[39] Gait 1926; Singh 1985, 27–31; Sundar 1997, 52.

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power, collective pride, and ethnic mobilization, aiding the communities in the struggle for resources and gaining political precedence.

Arguably, there was no administrative exercise under colonial rule having a significant impact on the making of tribes than the decennial census operations. The census operations, carried out for administrative efficiency, streamlining the taxation system, and managing developmental programs, pivoted on the classification of the Indian population based on racial, linguistic, and socio-economic categories. The social type labeled as "tribes" in the classification was deemed the most impoverished, backward, and mostly removed from civilization. In the decennial censuses, the colonial authorities came up with terms like "forest tribes" in the 1891 Census, included as a subheading under the broad category of agricultural and pastoral caste; in the 1901 and 1911 censuses, the category called "so-called animists" was added to list of caste and others; and in 1921 Census, the heading "tribal religion" replaced "animists," while in the 1931 Census, the officialdom came up with the term "primitive tribes."[40]

For social scientists, the ambiguity in classifying tribe and caste remained the bane of the colonial census enumerations; however, the census operations disregarded the dynamics of tribe and state, exacerbating the problem of classification. Consequently, in the 1941 Census, the last census in British India, some communities that had founded kingdoms and states became listed as tribes. Some may argue that the identification of these communities as tribes stems from a case of what anthropologists call the processes of detribalization and retribalization, but the ethnographic data belie the probability of an erstwhile state society completely shedding off its cultural patrimony and reverting to a "primitive" or pre-literate existence despite the retribalization process. The tribal situation in India shows that the degree of a community's interaction with the state in history had shaped their destiny in the post-independence period.

The British rule in India remains unparalleled since it exposed tribes to the complex structures and agencies of a state as never before. In the post-independence period, the colonial policies and interactions with the colonial state determined the positionality of tribes in the Indian state. The varying colonial experiences, geographic location, political motivations, and cultural capital would shape the tribal situation in independent India. Following India's independence, the perception of backwardness and disenfranchisement dominated the tribal policy, blurring the anthropological notion of social formations. The new Indian state ST list, primarily guided by affirmative action, did not take the historical backgrounds of the designated communities into consideration. This inconsistency had stemmed from the colonial scholarship and policies since the listing of ST in the post-independence period had an important basis in the 1931 Census headed by the administrator-scholar, John Henry Hutton. In 1881, the British government initiated the first decennial Census of India, which continued till the power transfer to the new Indian state in 1947. These census operations had a tremendous influence on the classification of the Indian populations, impacting policymaking and governance. In particular, the 1931 Census stood out since Hutton inexpediently employed religion as a parameter to define tribes, and it was also the last colonial census that undertook the enumeration of individual castes and tribes; more importantly, the 1931 Census became a basis for the classification of tribes and implementation of reservation policies in the post-independence period.[41]

[40] Ghurye 1959, 2–3; Xaxa 1999a, 1519.
[41] Hutton 1933.

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The British administrator-scholars called tribal people "aboriginal tribes," whom they regarded as the backward and most vulnerable section of the Indian society, overlooking the complexity of social formations in India. For instance, the colonial officialdom regarded the Raj Gond with their kingdoms and state formation tracing to the medieval period and the "primitive" Baiga, both from the generic Gond tribe, as aboriginal tribes.[42] Unlike other aboriginal communities such as the Korku, Korwa, and Pahariya, the Gonds had varied socio-cultural integration that consisted of tribes like the iron-smelter Agaria, state-builder Raj Gond, and Pardhans who traditionally served as bards of the Gond rulers; when the colonial rulers appeared on the scene, the Gond kings were enjoying the status of ruling chiefs, and the advanced sections of the Gonds vying with "Hindus in the fields of war and statesmanship."[43] The situation of the ruling Gonds contradicted the colonial officialdom's conception of tribes as primitive and vulnerable to the exploitation of non-tribals.

Arguably, the self-internalization of tribal groups as a nation is a modern phenomenon, which is beyond the scope of this article, but when the British rulers entered North-Eastern India, the Dimasa Kachari and Jaintia people were still ruling over petty kingdom-states, and the Khasis, still regarded as a tribe, were developing a state, exhibiting features of Hinduism, showing an advanced level of sociopolitical integration than their neighboring ethnic communities such as the Nagas, Mikirs, and Kukis who were the epitome of tribe in the anthropological imagination.[44] Arguably, the colonial officialdom made the anthropological concept of tribe complex since the Dimasa and Jaintia became officially listed as tribes in the colonial records and census enumerations, though the British rulers had annexed their kingdoms in the first half of the nineteenth century.[45]

In independent India, some communities, such as the Bhumij and Raj Gond, with conspicuous features of a state society—such as the presence of landed gentry, ruling families, and adherence to caste system—were included in the ST list; meanwhile, some communities with both the attributes of tribes and state—such as possessing the cult of ancestral worship, age-old traditions, and distinctive culture, which the community self-internalize as tribal characteristics—were excluded from the list. The latter type also included large ethnic communities, such as the Ahom and Meitei, who purposively did not claim the tribal status to retain their past glory as state builders. In addition, they also did not want to be equated with the hill tribes such as the Mishmi, Nyishi, Naga, and Kuki, whom the Hinduized Ahom and Meitei considered lowly and polluted.[46] The scheduling process became complicated over time as some communities were denied a spot in the schedule for possessing cultural traits, which the officialdom considered to be found among people in a state-level society. For example, Yogesh Atal observed that the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar, whom anthropologists study as a tribe for practicing polyandry, for a long time were denied ST status by the Uttar Pradesh government for the same as polyandry was practiced by the Pandava brothers, who are considered an epitome of state builders in the Hindu epic Mahabharata.[47] The tribal policies in post-independence India remained intractable since the notion of tribality, the historical context, the civilizational influence, and the dynamics of tribe and state varied from one region to the other.

[42] Elwin 1939.
[43] Elwin 1942; Fürer-Haimendorf 1948, 2; Hivale 1946.
[44] Béteille 1986, 313; Gait 1926.
[45] Goswami 2012, 18–20.
[46] Chophy 2025.
[47] Atal 2016, 31.

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4. Affirmative action, tribality, and state in post-independence India

When the newly independent Indian state furnished the central list of ST in 1950, the communities included therein were a spectrum, ranging from small isolated hunter-gatherers to large communities that had founded kingdoms and states. The new Indian state drew up the ST list from the colonial census enumerations, which inexpediently glossed over the complex sociopolitical integrations of communities labeled as tribes. For the identification of tribes, the colonial authorities had underscored parameters such as primitiveness, socio-economic backwardness, and indigeneity, and discounted the concepts of state and tribe, underpinning the Indian social reality.[48] Following independence, the new Indian state inherited the colonial tradition of identifying and classifying tribal populations. Consequently, this official exercise in the post-independence period had far-reaching effects in academia, policymaking, and social life since the communities included in the ST list gained currency as "tribes" whether they met the anthropological criteria. In the decades after independence, scholars had sifted through ancient literature, historical data, census reports, tribal monographs, and ethnographic literature to point out the inconsistencies between the sociological notion of the tribe and ST, which is a politico-administrative category devised by the Indian state.[49]

The framing of tribal policy for independent India was not an easy affair since the officialdom had to strike a balance between inclusive policies and bewildering sociopolitical realities of a new nation-state. Equally, if not more onerous, was defining ST, which required an arbitration between anthropological conventions and affirmative action, making this state-devised social category intractable for academia and policymaking. The officialdom recommended ST markers, such as backwardness, distinctive culture, remoteness, and economic impoverishment, but they proved perplexing in the Indian context. If the conventional anthropological concept of the tribe were employed, many communities would not have made it to the 1950 ST list. In addition, some communities, though not included in the schedule, would have passed the officialdom's ST litmus test if allowed to prove their case. Anthropologists and sociologists of Indian society learned to live with such contradictions, which had enriched the academic discourse, but the Indian tribal situation compared to other parts of the world proved exceedingly complex.

In the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, for instance, Martijn van Beek observes that the Ladakhis themselves "were not very keen to be identified with the real tribes," but their almost four decades of struggle for ST status stemmed from the entailing rights and privileges. If it were not for the constitutionally mandated ST, the discourse on tribes or Adivasis in India would have no bearing on the society, economy, and culture in the Ladakh region. Tribality, in this case, observes van Beek, becomes instrumental for Ladakh's political elite to achieve region-specific goals, which are far removed from the tribal or Adivasi discourse on cultural identity and self-determination.[50]

In principle, tribes' inclusion in the schedule had a basis in some measurable attributes to meet the sociological criteria. The officialdom at different points had appointed expert committees who had formulated criteria for identifying tribes. The Lokur Committee, which the Indian government commissioned in 1965 to remedy the ambiguity in the ST list, prescribed five criteria, namely primitive traits, distinct culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. Understandably, the

[48] Grigson 1944; Hutton 1927; Tewari 2025.
[49] Galanter 1984, 147.
[50] van Beek 2006, 118–20.

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report findings mentioned that the lion's share of the various benefits and concessions earmarked for the ST is appropriated by the numerically larger and politically well-organized communities.[51] The question that begs the answer is if the political precedence of these "well-organized communities" had a basis in the historical relation between tribe and state, amid other socio-cultural indexes. Noticeably, no high-level commission since the independence has considered the dynamics of tribe and state to streamline communities in the ST list. Amid other parameters, the negation of tribe and state as levels of sociopolitical integration has made ST an administrative or political category rather than an anthropological one.[52] Befittingly for an expert committee, the recent Xaxa Committee of 2014 stated that the category "tribe" entails a social and cultural dimension, but the category ST has politico-administrative implications.[53]

Communities that were included in the ST list came from diverse cultures, language families, modes of livelihood, and political systems. Notwithstanding, the anthropological conceptualization of tribe and state was left out in the classification of the ST. A close reading of the Constituent Assembly Debates and other watershed policy documents on the ST makes no mention of the dynamics of tribe and state. In the postcolonial period, scholars at length discussed the historical interaction between tribe and state, but their findings did not have any bearing on the tribal policies.[54] This meant that tribes in the lowest stage of socio-economic development had to vie for the same social benefits and reservations with tribal groups or subgroups who oxymoronically identified as a ruling caste or those that had inherited cultural resources and political precedence as constituents of a state society. The policymakers and social scientists were not oblivious to this Indian social reality, but the dynamics of tribe and state did not receive due attention in post-independence India.

Anthropologically speaking, the notion of ST disrupted the concept of band, tribe, chiefdom, and state to understand tribal societies in India, regardless of whether one subscribed to this evolutionary scheme or not. Similarly, the concept of a segmentary lineage system that provided a conceptual framework for studying tribes in Africa and elsewhere became relegated to the background.[55] The eschewal of a conceptual framework can be traced to colonial anthropology, where the British administrator-scholars did not make a distinction between the types of social formations, thus collapsing different levels of sociopolitical integration within the concept of tribe. This meant that the concept of tribe in India stood at variance with that of the anthropological conception of tribes in parts of Africa and Oceania among communities such as the Arunta, Hadza, Trobrianders, and San, where tribes meant a particular type of social formation, which is small-scale, simple, isolated, and centered on kinship ties.

Another compelling issue on tribe and state involves the process of the state becoming an ethnicity—a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, which has largely evaded the anthropological imagination in India. This phenomenon of a state becoming an ethnicity underscores the fact that the anthropological analysis goes beyond the conception of the state as a political entity, body politic, or formal institution of government. State as a socio-cultural integration is known for its multi-ethnic condition and is also a site of new ethnic identity formations. In addition, state society is distinct from tribal society because it absorbs diverse communities into the system, as the functioning of the state hinges on the differentiation of

[51] Department of Social Welfare 1965.
[52] Béteille 1986, 299.
[53] Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014.
[54] Chandra 2024; Singh 1985.
[55] Barth 1959; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1950.

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labor and the maintenance of social hierarchy. In this social process, an erstwhile state society—composed of different ethnic communities—has assumed an ethnicity or a tribe over a period of time, where people of other ethnicities are absorbed into a ruling ethnic group or new ethnic identities are generated. Here, tribes becoming castes, which social scientists call the tribe–caste continuum, has been a predominant conceptual model to understand the transformation of tribal societies. However, there are interesting cases from North-East India showing how a state society, which had absorbed people from various ethnic and occupational groups, has assumed an ethnicity over time. In this case, a kingdom or state founded by a tribe or ruling class absorbed people of different communities for the functioning of the state. Here, a state becomes the location of construction of new social identities; but, more importantly, the dominant community or tribe that founded the state absorbs all kinds of people into its fold, coalescing into a single ethnicity over time. The case of a state society becoming an ethnicity may be said of the Ahom, Chutia, and the Koch-Rajbongshi. In this context, the historian Edward Gait wrote that the state-builder Koch in Assam proper "has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of Kachari, Lalung, Mikir, and other tribes."[56]

Ethnic communities that were a state during the colonial period, claiming tribe status in independent India, became a common phenomenon. Further, there was a rise of sociopolitical movements where a tribe or an ethnic community demanded a separate state under the Indian Union, which covers the traditional territory—constructed or real—of an erstwhile kingdom or state that they had ruled over. To communities such as the Gonds and Koch-Rajbongshi demanding the Gondwana state and Kamatapur state, the history of their kingdom or state became a potent cultural resource binding people together for collective action. However, of all the political demands of tribal people in the post-independence period, the movement for a separate state based on the memory or history of an erstwhile state or kingdom has proved least successful.

5. A construction of the Indian state

Scholarly approaches about tribality are relevant for public life because they expand our minds and worlds about the borders of authority and thus who participates to, and therefore contributes to, the public spaces we inhabit. When the Indian state devised the social category ST, it was undergirded by the government's affirmative action and constitutional measures against inequality and discrimination. This fundamental approach of the government transformed the nature of the relationship between tribes and the Indian state, influencing scholarship and public life. Notwithstanding, the perception and response of the tribes toward the Indian state remained diverse that made tribal policy complex and contentious. For instance, there were tribal groups who were not cognizant of the accrued rights and protection under the constitution, given their disadvantaged position, whereas there were some tribes who spurned the affirmative action policies for a greater political demand.

India's affirmative action policy not only reinvented and reinvigorated the notion of backwardness and primitiveness, but also stagnated these perceptions among the tribal communities that wanted to be permanently settled in the schedule. In this case, those ethnic communities that may not have wanted to be labeled a tribe in the beginning now want to be identified as a ST. This demand to be included in the schedule was not because they wanted to be identified as tribes, which came with pejorative connotations in the

[56] Gait 1926, 44.

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Indian social life—but due to the rights, benefits, and protections afforded the ST in the Indian constitution.[57]

More perplexing for social scientists is a process where large ethnic communities, such as the Ahom, Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshis, and Meitei, who once were state societies, began to assert their "tribal" identity in post-independence India. This present-day political process subverts both the anthropological notion of tribe, which is understood as a social type marked by a distinctive level of socio-cultural integration from the state society, and the concept of state, which is largely a sociopolitical integration with centralized government regulating a stratified population within a fixed territory since the communities in question conveniently bypass their stage as a state society to reckon the social formation as a tribe in the past. This is a peculiar condition in post-independence India since communities of these earlier influential kingdoms do not relinquish their state heritage, but they can still reckon their tribal roots to join the ST bandwagon. The perception of tribes as simple, backward, and underdeveloped has not changed much in contemporary Indian society, but what is even more complex is the dominant communities with rich cultural heritage as a state society reinventing their "primitiveness" to claim the tribal status.[58] As I have argued earlier, the policies of the Indian state have brought about a different discourse on tribe, state, and indigeneity in public life, which is markedly different from other parts of the world. Thus, if the concept of tribe happens to be a colonial construction, then the notion of ST is a construction of the modern Indian state.

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[57] van Beek 2006.
[58] Atal 2016, 44.

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