

# Locating ‘Subalternity’ in Tribal Politics in India, with Special Reference to Uttar Pradesh

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## Abstract

The study of tribal politics has broadly followed two patterns. The first is the preoccupation of scholars with the question of integration of tribals into the 'mainstream' or the 'real political process' which is almost coterminous with the imaginary of what can commonly be referred to as the 'learning process' of 'nationalist politics'.

The second approach is an offshoot of the first and scholars have been preoccupied with the question of the impossibility of resolving the issues faced by tribals within the first framework. Accordingly, this framework tries to take out the discourse of tribal politics from what is perceived as a 'narrow and partial' approach to study the contribution made by the 'people on their own' as Ranajit Guha puts it.

The paper makes a limited attempt to study the interaction of tribal politics in one of India's largest states, Uttar Pradesh, vis a vis, attempts to incorporate them into the 'mainstream' through various practices that lie at the intersection of the 'public' and 'private' by placing religion at the centre of identity formation. In the end, I have tried to make some recommendations which will lead to a reduction in social exclusion and political marginalization

The paper will show the changing nature of state practices in India vis a vis the 'subalterns' and thus be useful for comparative studies across states.

## Conceptualizing Tribals As Subalterns

A Subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political or other hierarchy. It means someone who is marginalized or oppressed. The term 'subaltern' has been taken from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks. Since the 1980s, Ranajit Guha and a team of scholars presented a series of studies in social sciences called the 'subaltern studies'. Other prolific scholars who contributed substantially in this project were Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakraborty. They attempted to re-write Indian history from the perspective of rural subaltern masses. Subaltern is the 'other' of elite. The term 'elite' has been used in the statement to signify dominant groups, both foreign as well as indigenous. The dominant groups included all non-Indian. The dominant indigenous groups included classes and interests operating at two levels. At the all India level it was the mercantile bourgeoisie and native recruits to the uppermost level of bureaucracy. At the regional level, such classes were either members of the dominant all-India groups or belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of all-India groups but acted in the interests of the latter. The same class that is dominant in one area could be dominated by another, the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, upper middle peasants belong to the subaltern class. Ranajit Guha uses the term 'people' and 'subaltern class' synonymous. It is the difference between the total Indian population and whom we have described as an elite.

Subaltern school of historians portrayed tribals as subaltern other and are necessary victims of colonial subordination and exploitation. Tribals have been viewed in India as an anthropological and ethnic construct. Stereotypes of backwardness, nudity, isolation of tribes have been the main argument of these studies. In a sense, they have been necessary victims of ‘the politics of knowledge making’, practiced by dominant groups against marginalized people. Tribes have been looked with a sense of otherness to it. The paper will highlight a tribal discourse of Uttar Pradesh and will focus how the BJP is trying to bring them within the fold of the larger Hindu identity by coopting elements of their subalternity within the larger Hindu fold.

### **Social Exclusion Of Tribes In Uttar Pradesh**

There has been a social exclusion of tribals in UP. Exclusion was triggered by the fact that the constitution of India did not recognize tribals as a separate social category. The constitution divided tribal population into ST's and non-ST's, but failed to give any recognition to the non-ST's, subsequently recognizing ST's for the purposes of reservations in the Parliament and the legislative assembly. It deprived non-ST's from political representation and empowerment. In a state like UP, the reservation share of the SC's swelled from 13.5% to 21% leaving just 1% for the ST's. Also, there has been an economic exploitation of ST's and non-ST's. The ST's suffered economic exploitation because of the lack of political clout. Their numbers were arbitrarily and artificially reduced substantially and consequently they could not assert themselves politically. If we look at the census of 1891, there were hundreds of tribals in UP which showed that every district in UP had several tribal castes/sub-castes in big or small numbers, but census data reported zero ST's in UP in 1951 and 1961. How could they suddenly disappear in the state after independence? The reason was that there were multiple onslaughts on tribal community in UP through political ignorance and administrative apathy. The loss of identity was due to a three-fold onslaught -constitutional, political and administrative. In terms of constitutional assault, the constitution only identified tribals living in scheduled areas or ST's. In doing so, they completely ignored the tribals who were equally more backward, poor or marginalized, but were living in non-scheduled areas. Thus, the tribes who were non-ST's lost their tribal identity. Furthermore, they were forcibly and arbitrarily put into other social categories namely SC's, OBC's to which they didn't belong. Subsequently, they were forced to find a place in non-tribal Hindu social welfare. In terms of political assault, it came from highest executive office, the President of India. Under article 342, the President was authorized to identify ST's on the advice of the governors of respective states. It was not clear that how the consultation process was conceived or what criteria was formulated by the government. The process neglected scholarly works of RV Russel, Hira lal and W. Crooke. The president notified only 5 tribes – *Bhotiya*, *Bhooka*, *Jansari*, *Raji* and *Tharau* as ST's and didn't even bother to raise the issue of remaining tribes. In terms of administrative assault, despite of the recognition of 5 tribes, the census showed zero ST's in two successive census of 1951 and 1961. It was clear that one of them was surely wrong, either President made a false notification or the census was wrong. It was in the 1971 census data, that the ST population was recognized after a long neglect of 19 years, but it was only the recognition of those 5 tribal identities- *Bhotiya*, *Bhooka*, *Jansari*, *Raji* and *Tharau*. These three types of exclusion altogether led to a severe identity crisis among the tribal communities of UP and being poor, uneducated and highly backward, they couldn't protest their exclusion from tribal domain and meekly accepted their artificial placement in the new social category of Hindu hierarchy. Thus, they didn't benefit from the reservations that were provided to them. There has been a wrong census that was predominant in several decades. Census reported 17% decadal growth rate

in the ST population in UP during 1971-1981. 23% During 1981-1991. In 2001, it was 1 lakh population and in 2011 census & in 2011, the ST population was 26 lakhs. As per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 2002, tribes were included in ST category in Uttar Pradesh leaving several districts like Gazipur, Varanasi. After a struggle for 52 years, the 17 sub-tribal castes were given recognition within the ' The question arises that how can 1 lakh population be swelled up to 26 lakhs in 2011. Unfortunately, the 17 sub-castes were given reservations only on 13 districts in UP (eastern districts). The real number of ST's would be very different if they were given due recognition in 85 districts. paradox was that while the administration of UP recognized Gonds as STs, in the first place, it also Also, the shifting of 17 OBC/SC categories to the ST list had paradoxes with them; The first mentioned *Dhuria, Naik, Ojha, Pathari* as sub-castes & the districts in which they were recognized were all eastern districts where upper caste Brahmins using surnames like *Ojha* and *Nayek* also got reservation benefits. This is not just an anomaly but a great injustice to Gonds as Ojhas and Nayeks are gobbling up all the advantages of ST's. A second paradox that can be highlighted is that the real sub castes of Gonds called *Beldar, Gudia, Kahar, Kharwar, Mallah* and *Turha* were not included in the list. The tribal population of UP suffered a political deprivation too, the politicization of tribes in UP never happened and they have failed considerably in becoming a vote bank. Secondly, they have failed to get into political formations and political parties and their ancillary organizations and could neither became office bearers or people's representative at Panchayats, Municipalities, assembly or parliamentary levels. Most bizarre was the exclusion of *Kahars* and *Mallahs* from Gond tribe. Gond is the main tribe and *kahars* and *mallahs* are occupational tribes ( fishing and boating tribe). The tribals in UP have suffered an economic exploitation for a very long time, the reason is due to their excessive dependance on water, forest and land. After Independence, tribal communities faced two major setbacks; first, as most of them lost their identity, their traditional livelihood was disrupted. Second, in the name of development, local rural feudal elites paid them peanuts or used muscle power to dislocate and disrupt their livelihood. If we look at Kols, they have been badly treated by feudal lords who resorted to economic exploitation. They tried to dispossess them from their land, their only source of livelihood and tried to take advantage of the fact that Kols didn't believe in private ownership of land nor were they aware of about how to establish ownership. During emergency (1975-1977), Indira Gandhi allotted the Kols the right to Gaon Sabha but that was just to win over the angry Kols who were resorting up to arms. However, the entire scheme remained on paper as the local feudal manipulated ownership by splitting the land in the name of their relatives & Kol servants, persuaded them to take loans from banks promising to pay that back on their behalf and when they didn't pay back it was the Kols who lost their land and landed in jails on many occasions.

### **Rise Of Hindutva Politics And Mobilization Of Tribal Population**

Political analysts argue that the stunning rise of BJP happened due to political strategies of the current Prime minister of India, Narendra Modi and his right hand man, Amit Shah who is the current minister of home affairs and former president of the BJP as well as the hard work of RSS and the allied organizations like the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) & the Bajrang Dal. Among all the members, the RSS is the *garvagriha* (womb) of Hindutva politics. Although sometimes the BJP appears as the political wing of RSS, in reality the BJP has developed its own way of creating the hegemonic influence on the Indian public & the RSS provides organizational support to various BJP political campaign through its well-organized cadre base. Analysts believe that RSS has played a major role in Modi's victory of Lok Sabha elections, but he is not under the pressure to follow the dictates of the Sangh Parivar. Scholars have pointed

out that the RSS is like the tip of the iceberg. The part which is invisible is much larger than the part which is visible. Political analysts who hold forth RSS on heated television debates do not understand the real power of RSS, use relatively superficial aspects like electoral success and communalism to define RSS. The problem with opposition is that they are fighting with an image of the RSS that is not the reality. The RSS is changing day by day but the politicians are attacking the image of RSS which is much older and has become obsolete. The political forces attacking the RSS are just attacking its shadow but are unable to understand the real RSS. Among the two books by Walter K Anderson and Sridhar K Daml, '*RSS: A view to the inside*' offers an overview of the history of RSS, its ideas and ideology & some changes over the years by people who made it or changed it. Des Raj Gopal's book, '*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*' also talks about ideology and culture of the RSS & its role in the overall rightwing ecosystem of India. Dharendra K Jha's '*Shadow Armies: Fringe operations and foot soldiers of Hindutva*' talks about the numerous overt and covert organizations affiliated to RSS. Sunil Ambedkar's '*The RSS: Roadmaps for 21<sup>st</sup> Century*' tries to answer many questions about the RSS that puzzled intellectuals and the general public alike. The mission of the RSS now is to create a cultural hegemony that will include the entire Hindu community and even many traditionally non-Hindu tribals and other minority groups. Now the Hindutva organizations are involved in creating a Hindu narrative on social sites or training their cadres for mobilizing as many social groups as possible.

Several RSS cadres in UP opine that they don't want communal riots in society as blame of communal riots damages their credibility and reputation. Since the 1990s, after the implementation of the Mandal commission report, the SP and the BSP became very popular & emerged around caste politics. To counter this, BJP moved ahead around religious identities and the 'Mandal-Mandir' debate came into limelight. In 2014 elections, we find that religious based politics was linked with the idea of development to homogenize and mobilize low caste groups and the non-Hindu tribals that were fighting underdevelopment. At a political rally in Fatehpur during election campaign on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2017, PM Modi remarked that if you create a *Kabaristan* (graveyard) in a village, then a *Shamshaan* (cremation ground) should be created. If electricity is given uninterrupted in Ramzan, then it should also be given in Diwali without a break, "*Bhedbhaav nahi hona chahiye*" (there should be no discrimination). It is the Dalits who work in Hindu cremation grounds & by raising this issue, BJP offered them a sense of inclusion. Another trend that is shown is that communal clashes happened on a large scale & after long intervals, now there has been small clashes which are sporadic and latent. So, communal clashes is no longer momentary, but has become a continuous presence. This doesn't mean that small communal clashes are free from getting transformed into big communal riots, but in the absence of long term preparations, it becomes more difficult to transform them. The spread of trade and commerce in Western UP played an important role in the significant expansion of different branches of the RSS which was trying to increase the cultural assertion of Hindutva. The BJP has been working on linking the desire for development of the creation of '*Maha Hindu*' identity by creating a political condition based on religious identities & inculcating several tribal communities, at Uttar Pradesh and even at the national level. The umbrella Maha Hindu identity has been poised to make the Muslim votes irrelevant. So, detribalization in Uttar Pradesh is consciously attached with the card of development. The mainstream Hindutva political and social groups want to use polarization for limited purposes. It is used to fringe out non- Hindutva elements.

## Conclusion

Despite constituting an impressive 8.7% of the population which is scattered across states, Adivasis have

never got special attention in the politics of India. As a social category, they have remained for long a suffix of scheduled castes in the official parlance of governance. For BJP, Adivasis have been an important part of their politics although this trend has been more significant after 2014 as evidenced by Draupadi Murmu as the Presidential candidate. It was under Vajpayee government that instituted a separate national commission for Scheduled tribes through the 89<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Act, 2003. Historically, if we trace the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, political parties, politicians have engaged in polarization like Samajwadi Party having a traditional voter base of Brahmins and BSP having a traditional voter base of OBC's, but now this has undergone a metamorphosis as there has been a structural change in the traditional voter system. Brahmins are moving towards BSP and OBC's, Dalits and other tribal communities are moving towards SP. Scholars like Yogendra Yadav calls this a 'second democratic upsurge' which started in 1990s and this upsurge is basically a homogenization of subalterns and with the rise of Hindutva Politics these identities are inculcated under the 'Maha-Hindu' identity. Under Modi, systematic efforts to mobilize tribal communities through governmental developmental schemes are strongly evident. The RSS-BJP model of mobilizing voters works alongside the creation of a majoritarian impulse and an ability to mutate the definition of Hindu identity. It all boils down to the politics of utility & that how a person has utilized its identities. The politics of utility is followed by the politics of recognition as there is a natural human tendency to get recognized even more and the government historically have worked on these primordial identities in allocation of resources. The debate of self-autonomy and detribalization still remains as questions might be thrown at a democratic government for its nature of inclusivity and accommodating identities.

The government of Uttar Pradesh needs serious exercise to recommend to the central government to weed out the undeserved, unscrupulous tribal castes/sub-castes from the ST list and include those left out in 2002. If that happens, their social exclusion could take a back seat. The state government, the central government and the newly formed national commission for Scheduled tribes should make a fresh effort to correctly identify tribals in UP and accord them ST status. Those already identified as ST's in 13 districts of UP in 2002 should be given ST status throughout the state. Also, the state of UP should constitute a full fledged state commission for ST's for fresh identification of tribes and making all out efforts to enable the government to create a separate social category for non-ST's so that those tribal groups who were denied entry into the ST category should get at least recognition as tribals so as to get back their original identity. The commission should also make recommendations and substantial effort for the betterment of socio-economic conditions of non-ST's and ST's. It is very unfortunate that all governments headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav, Mayawati and Adityanath Yogi attempted to shift identities from OBC to SC category. Hence, it is clear that at political and governmental levels, there is very little knowledge or awareness about the problems faced by tribals in UP. It is just hoped that this academic venture would lead to a reduction in social exclusion, political marginalization and economic exploitation faced by tribals in general and particularly in Uttar Pradesh.

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