



Land Culture of the Tribes: A Scientific Approach to Identification of Tribes in Northeast India

R. Zonunsanga*

Abstract

In the Indian context, the term 'tribe' has been explained and defined variously connoting different meanings based on the subject of one's objectives. Having no precise definition and without common agreement amongst the social scientists, this paper attempts at bringing a common accord through physical scientific parameters to identify the tribes. With the advent of industrialization, tribal's ways of life have been altered by means of attempt for economic productivity, communication technology, infrastructural engineering, and unwelcomed exploitation of their natural habitats. Science and logic are always based on either qualitative or quantitative assessment which passed through sets of man-made scales and measurements. Throughout the history of mankind, scientists from physical and earth sciences have been using different scales of measurement within the major parameters of time, matter or space. The land culture systems of tribes in India have passed through ample time using the same matter of natural resources and unique geographical space, that this very system of land culture may be considered as one of the basis for tribal identity.

Keywords: Tribes, Jhumming, Forest, Agriculture, Resources, Culture.

Introduction

The term 'tribes' in India is nowhere defined precisely even within the academic circle nor in the Indian Constitution where they are simply referred to as the 'Scheduled Tribes' comprising lists of people who are considered to fall under the category specified by the President of India. The so-called Scheduled Tribes comprises 8.6% of the total population of India (2011 Census) and being considered as economically backward, they have been given reservation of seats for employment and services under the Government of India that has turned up a matter of issues and arguments. In fact, unemployment being one of the greatest problems in India, claims for inclusion under the *Scheduled Tribes* by certain ethnic groups is inevitable that geo-political as well as socio-economic demarcation or identification

* UGC-Human Resource Development Centre, Mizoram University, Aizawl - 796004, Mizoram

of original tribes has become mandatory even if not compelled at this contemporary world of India.

Tribes in India have distinctive features of tradition or culture especially in the realm of land utilization or agri-CULTURE which has been continued since time immemorial and such systems have become parts of their social lives, often expressed in the form of festivals, rituals, economic division of labours and felicitations of their booming individual agrarians. Even after relentless effort for scientific implementation of modern agricultural techniques, the identity of original tribes in India comes vividly unaltered with their land-use systems or the agrarian's culture of natural resources utilization.

Tribal's Agri-CULTURE through Time

The use of time scales or chronological sequencing is one of the means of modern scientific studies. Scientific inventions or innovations have to pass through time to prove their sustainability and their universal validity. In the history of mankind, there had been certain discoveries which were assumed to be logical and accepted as universal truth. Many of these facts were, however, lately proven to have divergence from the reality.

Concerning the mini-world of the tribes all over the world, their peculiar systems of agriculture have been proven through time and validated as their identity. Men's first primitive agriculture, as an 'uncivilized' tribe, began in uplands (Sauer, 1952) during the *Neolithic* period and then gradually shifted towards river valleys after being 'civilized'. Tribes all over the world have continued to practice the same farming except for replacement of tools used for cultivation.

Tribals, black aborigines similar to those found in New Guinea and Australia, are believed to be the original inhabitants of much of southern India having a DNA evidence of their spans 70,000 years back (Hays, 2008). Agriculture is the primary source of income of the tribal people of India (Parida, 2015) and historically, these tribal communities were characterized by distinct agrarian lifestyle and agricultural practice (CMS, 2009).

The so-called tribes all over India are identified as scheduled tribes which politically connotes as 'uncivilized'. This means that the 'uncivilized or semi-civilized' tribes in India still follows the nomadic pattern of agriculture which is known as '*slash and burn*' or '*shifting agriculture*'. This land culture system, also known as *Jhumming* in Northeast India is a part and parcel of their socio-cultural life and as such all its operations are inseparably linked with their religious rites and festivals (Singh & Sharma, 1999) that this agricultural system is still one of the most dominant practices even during this post-computer age.

Tribal's Resources (Matter) for Agri-CULTURE

Fundamentals of science give that matter occupies space and has weight which can be measured and proven anywhere within the Earth's biosphere. One of the tribal's identities has always been seen through their uses of natural bio-resources as nutrients or fertilizers to their agricultural crops. The advent of British colonialism had tremendously changed the cultural

matters used for religious worship, clothing, scriptures, constructions and many more except their systems of agriculture. Tribal communities have lived in a symbiotic relationship with forest through ages and forests play a very significant role in tribal economy where all their socio-cultural practices are woven around forests (FSI, 2011).

“As a paternalist administrator, Thomas Lewin had initiated every measure of reform or improvement to turn the Mizos into sedentary peasants. He offered loans in the hope that the locals would settle down to own, and hold land, as permanent cultivators” (Lewin, 1912), but it largely remains a pipe dream (Vumlallian Zau, 2015).

One of the most scientific parts of tribal’s agricultural system is the utilization of forest resources to support the crops. Despite the precipitous-humid weather of the tropics and the rugged topographic impact on extensive erosion of soil nutrients, the tribes have their own ways of regenerating the pedogenic (soil) resources.

Bio-systems, after being kept intact, help soil resilience to degradation and regenerate soil nutrients to support agriculture in the future. In the tribal’s ways of land culture, forests or biotic resources are always used to sustain the multi-cropping system.

Geographical Space for Tribal’s Land-CULTURE

India’s tribal population constitutes the largest in the world whose concentrations are mostly confined along the Himalayas and hilly tracts of central and south India and, in most cases, hill tribes are defined as indigenous communities that live at an elevation above 1,000 metres above Mean Sea Level (Hays, 2008).

In terms of geographical space, tribal people have always chosen isolation and their identity is seen from the location of their agricultural land which has been practiced at places which are considered unfeasible for cropping. Undulating and sloping lands amidst forested tract of highly elevated areas, where farm mechanization is impracticable, are always preferred for land domestications. Intensive-multi cropping systems are followed to minimize the areal extent of forests used for farming which shows their great respect and concern for preservation of the forest resources. These distinctive features of the tribe can be seen from their utilization and reservation of forests area.

Table 1 shows the population and its density, area of their districts and its forests cover. Regardless of the variations in population pressure or density in different states and districts under the tribes, more than 75% of their land comes under the forest. This shows that the tribes have their own culture to limit the use of forest resources only upto 25%.

Land-use studies carried out at certain parts of Northeast India reveal that about 5% of the geographical areas are being used every year for *jhumming* which are then kept as unused fallow to allow forest regenerations. This fallow period has been reduced from 10-20 years to 5-7 years (Swamy, 2018) which may indicate that rotation of *jhumming* is restricted within 25% of the lands occupied by the tribes.

Table 1: Tribal's Population versus Forest Cover in Tribal's Districts of NE India

NE States with Major Tribes	Scheduled Tribe's Population	Area under Tribal's District (km ²)	Population Density in Tribal's Districts (per km ²)	Forest Cover under Tribal's Districts (km ²)	Forest within ST's Land (%)
Arunachal Pr.	951821	83743	11	67410	81 %
Meghalaya	2555861	22429	114	17275	77 %
Manipur	1167422	22327	52	17090	77 %
Mizoram	1036115	21081	49	19117	91 %
Nagaland	1710973	16579	103	13318	80 %
Tripura	1166813	10486	111	7977	76 %

Source: (i) India Census 2011 (ii) India State of Forest Report 2011.

Conclusion

Chronologic and chorological evidences provide many scenes of change in culture where some cultures had been totally lost. Tribal cultures too have been either transformed, malformed or reformed through time and space especially in the realms of socio-political spheres. Access to education and modern communication systems have changed the traditional morphologic landscape of the then traditional simple hand-woven clothing; the superstitious beliefs on odd physical structures and phenomena and; the solitary confinement of political democracy under their respective Chiefs. Though the nomadic agrarian activities have also been changed at least to a slight extent, most of the tribes in North East India still retained their culture of land domestication including its associated festivals and rituals. This very culture of the agrarian tribal societies which still exists – using the same matter and geographical space after passing through time provides a unanimous identity of the tribes in northeast India.

References

- Census of India. 2011. *Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Tribes (ST) (District/Sub-District/Town level)*. India Census – 2011.
- CMS. 2009. *Impact Assessment of Agriculture Interventions in Tribal Areas in Madhya Pradesh – Final Report*. Catalyst Management Services, Catalyst, Bhopal.
- FSI. 2011. *India State of Forest Report 2011*. Forest Survey of India, Dehradun.
- Hays, Jeffrey. 2008. *Tribal People in India*. Facts and Details. http://factsanddetails.com/india/minorities_castes_and_relegions_in_India/sus7_4h/entry-4216.html. (23/01/19).

- Lewin, Thomas Herbert. 1912. *A fly on the wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute.
- Parida, Biswajit. 2005. *Santal and their Agricultural Practices: Continuity and Change*. International Journal of Applied Research, Vol. 1(11).
- Sauer, C.O. 1952. *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals*. Cambridge, MA and London. MT Press.
- Singh G.B. & Sharma B.R. 1999. *50 Years of Natural Resource Management Research in India*. Division of Natural Resource Management, Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), New Delhi.
- Swamy, Sanjay. 2018. *Shifting Cultivation: A Tribal way of life in Northeast India and Alternative Approach for Increasing Productivity*. The Pharma Innovation Journals, Vol.7(3).
- Vumlallian Zau, David. 2015. *Production of Place: Folk Geographies and Religious Desire in Colonial Mizoram*, In Malsawmdawngliana, Lalrameng K. Gangte & Rohmingmawii Eds. *Orality and Folk Literature in the Age of Print Culture: India's Northeast Experience*. Scientific Book Centre, Guwahati.