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Q8(a)

Discuss the distribution of tribes in different geographical regions of India. Identify the distinct institutional features of tribal societies of these regions.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Tribal situation in India

6.1 Tribal situation in India-Bio-genetic variability, linguistic and socio-economic characteristics of the tribal populations and their distribution.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the distribution of tribes in different geographical regions of India
- Identify the distinct institutional features of tribal societies of these regions
- Use ecology and ethnography together
- Do not give only a list of names

Revision summary

Tribal India clusters in the Himalaya, North-East, middle Indian uplands, western hills, southern enclaves, and islands.

North-East institutions include morung, **Khasi matriliney**, Inner Line, and **Sixth Schedule** councils.

Middle India shows **khuntkatti**, manjhi, sarna, and a tribe-caste continuum under the **Fifth Schedule**.

Western Bhils are more peasantised; southern Toda and Chenchu keep specialised dairies or foraging.

Island PVTGs are bands with a separate contact ethic from Nicobarese horticultural villages.

Introduction

Indian tribes are not one society. They sit in Himalayan, north-eastern, middle Indian, western, southern, and island regions. Each region's ecology shaped land tenure, kinship, and political institutions. Distribution plus institutions is the full answer.

Body**Himalayan and western Himalayan foothills**

- Groups include **Gaddi, Kinnaur, Bhotia, Jaunsari, Tharu** (tarai), and others. High-altitude agro-pastoralism, transhumance, and trade with the plateau are typical.
- **Institutions:** village and clan control of grazing; Buddhist monasteries in some trans-Himalayan belts; Inner Line is not general here except historically in some tracts.

North-East hills and Brahmaputra valley fringes

- **Naga, Mizo, Khasi, Garo, Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Bodo**, and many others. Jhum in most hills; **Apatani** wet-rice terraces as a famous exception (**Haimendorf**, Elwin).

- **Institutions:** **morung** or bachelor dormitory among many Nagas; **Khasi matriliney** and kur clans; village republics and later **Sixth Schedule** councils; **Inner Line**; church as a new public in Naga and Mizo areas; **Article 371A/G**.

Middle India (Chotanagpur-Bastar-Satpura-Odisha)

- **Munda, Santal, Ho, Oraon, Gond, Khond, Bhil** (also west), **Baiga**. Mixed plough, forest, and remnants of jhum.
- **Institutions:** **Munda khuntkatti** and parha; Santal manjhi-parganait; Gond garth and clan; **sarna** sacred groves; tribe-caste continuum (**Bailey, Roy, Sachchidananda**). **Fifth Schedule** and PESA are the legal shell.

Western India

- **Bhil, Bhilala, Garasia, Warli, Kokna**. Hills of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Dry forest and rain-fed millet.
- **Institutions:** gameti or village head; dev and pal territorial cults; strong peasantisation and Hindu festival traffic (**Ghurye's** evidence is thick here).

South India and Nilgiris

- **Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Irula, Chenchu, Kadar, Koya**. Distinct niches: Toda buffalo pastoralism and dairies; Chenchu foraging in Nallamala.
- **Institutions:** Toda **dual moieties** and dairy sacred dairies; Nilgiri multi-tribe exchange; some PVTG isolation.

Islands

- **Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge, Sentinelese, Shompen, Nicobarese**. Foraging versus Nicobarese horticulture and canoe villages.
- **Institutions:** band and camp among PVTGs; Nicobarese joint families and tuhet; extreme contact ethics for Sentinelese.

Point of the map

- Geography does not invent culture alone, but wet-rice, jhum, hunting, and island foraging produce different offices, marriage, and land law.
- Policy that copies one "tribal institution" onto all six regions fails.

Flow diagram

North-East -> Morung matriliney ADC
 Middle India -> Khuntkatti sarna PESA
 West -> Bhil village cults
 South -> Toda dairy Chenchu foraging
 Islands -> Band and tuhet

Conclusion

Tribes are distributed across Himalaya, North-East, middle India, the west, the south, and the islands. Distinct institutions include **Khasi matriliney**, **Naga morung**, Munda **khuntkatti**, Toda dairies, and Andaman bands. Nation and Schedule must fit the region, not a single tribal type.

Facts & figures

Khuntkatti

Munda lineage-based claim to village land in Chotanagpur, recorded in S. C. Roy's ethnography.

Khasi matriliney

Descent and often house-property through the female line among Khasis of Meghalaya.

Naga morung

Village dormitory and training institution for young men, central to many Naga polities.

Apatani terraces

Intensive wet-rice in Arunachal, showing that not all North-Eastern tribes are only jhum cultivators.

Toda dairy

Sacred buffalo dairies and moiety organisation in the Nilgiris, a specialised pastoral institution.

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