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Q2(b)

What are the definitional problems involved in identifying tribes in India? Discuss the main obstacles to tribal development in India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Tribal communities in India

Tribal communities in India: Definitional problems; Geographical spread; Colonial policies and tribes; Issues of integration and autonomy.

Core demand of the question

- Show why 'tribe' is a contested administrative and anthropological category in India
- Cover colonial census, tribe versus caste, language, religion, and ST lists
- **Then discuss obstacles to tribal development:** land, forest, displacement, health, education, elite capture, and policy models
- Use Ghurye, Elwin, **Xaxa**, FRA, Fifth and Sixth Schedules

Revision summary

Tribe in India is an administrative and historical label, not one anthropological type.

Ghurye's assimilation and Elwin's isolation disagree on what tribes are.

ST lists, not isolation tests, now identify groups, which creates political and scientific problems.

Land alienation, forest law and displacement are the main development obstacles.

FRA, PESA and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules exist; implementation and consent remain weak.

Introduction

'Tribe' in India is not a clean scientific species. It is a **colonial and constitutional label laid on many kinds of community: plough peasants, forest cultivators, pastoralists and hunters. Definitional problems are therefore the first obstacle to policy. Development schemes then meet land alienation, forest law, displacement and a thin voice in the state. Virginus Xaxa** has insisted that tribes be treated as a **society with history**, not as a leftover of evolution.

Body

Definitional problems

Nineteenth-century ethnography used isolation, 'primitive' technology, animism and kinship as markers. The census then froze lists. **Ghurye** argued that many so-called aborigines were **backward Hindus**, sharing caste-like ranking and Sanskrit contact. **Elwin** stressed distinct culture, myth and forest livelihood and favoured protection. Neither definition matches all groups. The **Santal, Gonds, Bhils, Nagas and Andaman peoples** do not form one social type.

- **After Independence the operational definition is the Scheduled Tribe list:** a political-administrative schedule, not a fieldwork test. Groups campaign to enter or leave it. Criteria used by commissions-geographical isolation, distinctive culture, backwardness, shy contact-are circular and often outdated. Sanskritization and conversion blur 'animism'. Inter-marriage and markets blur isolation. Some ST groups are stratified internally; some non-ST forest peasants look similar on the ground. **Tribe versus caste** is a continuum in many regions, as Srinivas and Bailey noted in different ways. Language is not decisive: tribal speakers of Indo-Aryan or Dravidian tongues still sit on lists. Religion is not decisive: Christian, Hindu and sarna identifications coexist.
- **So identification problems are:** (1) colonial evolutionist residue; (2) mismatch between anthropological type and ST schedule; (3) internal diversity; (4) mobility and contact that ruin isolation tests; (5) political incentive to claim or deny the label.

Obstacles to tribal development

Land and forest are the material core. **Colonial Forest Acts** and the **Indian Forest Act, 1927** turned customary use into concession. Post-Independence dams, mines, factories and protected areas displaced millions. The **Forest Rights Act, 2006** promised community and individual rights; implementation is uneven and often hostile in the field. **Fifth Schedule** protections, Governors' powers and **PESA, 1996** are weakly used. **Sixth Schedule** councils in the Northeast have more institutional muscle but their own elite politics.

- **Human development obstacles follow:** boarding schools that break language, poor health and nutrition, indebtedness, and trafficking. **Development-induced displacement** without land-for-land creates a new casual labour class. Mining and counter-insurgency in central India militarise everyday life. A small **tribal elite** captures jobs and contracts; **Xaxa** and others warn against reading ST reservation as group development. Isolation, assimilation and integration as policy models (**Elwin, Ghurye, and official integration**) have all failed when they ignore land and consent.

Health, schooling and language are not side issues. Residential schools can produce a small salariat and a large experience of cultural loss. NEP 2020's mother-tongue aim matters here if it includes tribal languages rather than only major regional standards. Without land, a degree still sends youth into the same informal labour stream described for industry.

Obstacles are therefore definitional and structural together. If the state cannot say who is a tribe except by a list, and if the list's lands are taken for national development, 'tribal development' becomes a residual welfare budget beside extraction.

Flow diagram

Unclear tribe definition -> ST list politics
 Forest and land loss -> Obstacles to development
 Mines dams parks -> Obstacles to development
 ST list politics -> Obstacles to development
 FRA PESA Schedules PESA Schedules -.weak use. -> Obstacles to development

Conclusion

Tribes in India are hard to identify because the word mixes colonial typing, lived diversity and a political ST schedule. Development stalls where forest and land rights are insecure, displacement is routine, and policy oscillates between isolation and assimilation without tribal control over resources. FRA, PESA and the Schedules are the available tools; their weak use is the main contemporary obstacle.

Facts & figures

Forest Rights Act 2006

Recognises individual and community forest rights of forest dwellers; implementation is contested.

PESA 1996

Extends panchayat powers to **Fifth Schedule** areas, including consultation on land and resources.

Xaxa

Argues for treating tribes as contemporary societies with citizenship claims, not as primitives.

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