

Exploring the Tribal History of Jharkhand through Ethnography

Paper Submission: 10/04/2020, Date of Acceptance: 25/04/2020, Date of Publication: 27/04/2020

Abstract

Interdisciplinary approach in research has broadened the scope of conventional subjects of humanities beyond their core area. History writing also makes use of various other auxiliary disciplines, one of them is ethnography. This paper highlights the correlation between ethnography and history esp. tribal history. This paper shows how ethnography can be used to explore various facets of tribal culture by taking into consideration the example of various ethnographical accounts written on the tribes of Chotanagpur in colonial and post- colonial India.

Keywords: Ethnography, Anthropology, Tribal history, Chotanagpur, Colonial.

Introduction

Anthropology has played a significant political role in India, both deliberate and unintentional. From the earliest ethnological writings of British administrators and European missionaries to the work of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Tribal Research Institutes, anthropological understandings of the people of India have shaped or influenced, in diverse ways, governing practices of the state, the formation of cultural identities, and political and social movements (Upadhyay, 2011, p.266).

Ethnography is a particular way of doing fieldwork which has been characteristically associated with the discipline of anthropology. Ethnography and ethnology tend to refer to the observable aspects of a society encountered by the anthropologist in the field, the basic data are observed by them which are later synthesized and combined with theory to produce a rounded anthropology (Gosden, 1999, p.3). In other words Ethnography is the scientific description of the history, traditions and mutual differences of the various races, tribes and castes. Ethnographic fieldwork has three basic elements: long-term residence in the field, linguistic interactions with the tribe under study and most essentially participant observation.

An ethnographer is believed to do fieldwork in a faraway place, ideally amongst a close community or a village where he or she would spend a considerable length of time interacting with the people, collecting information from them, minutely looking at their ways of life and picking up various anecdotes, incidents, events and occurrences. It is through such intricate details that a comprehensive account of people's lives is documented (Mukhopadhyay, 2019, p.44).

History makes use of various other ancillary or auxiliary disciplines. Like history, the other social sciences, whether sociology, anthropology, political science or economics, study man in society and they do deal with the problem of change (Sreedharan, 2018, p.4). Ethnography may also enrich tribal history. Richard Lee, a social anthropologist writes in this regard: 'if every African pre-historian spent a field season working with the Kalahari Bushmen (or the Australian Aborigines), this experience would immeasurably enrich his understandings of all levels of African pre-history' (Lee, 1968, p.345). Herodotus, who is considered as the father of history, laid the foundation of ethnographic study in Greece. He travelled to different places and described the culture of its inhabitants.

Earlier it was believed that tribal people do not have a history, and if at all they have, its sense is shallow. When the colonial people encountered them for the first time, they could not delve into the history of these people whom they labeled as tribes, aborigines, etc. Because of their ignorance of the history of tribal people, they narrowed down the scope of history and chained it within the confinement of so- called scientific



Saurabh Mishra

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Medieval and Modern
Indian History,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, U.P, India

approach. Not only that, they rejected oral sources as unscientific and did not think it wise to work on an alternative approach to construct the history of these preliterate people. In doing so, they ignored the role of tribal past in the making of human history (Behera, 2019).

Ethnographic Accounts on the Tribes of Jharkhand Studies by colonial Ethnographers and Administrators

The earliest writings on tribes of Jharkhand were those of nineteenth century British administrators whose attention was drawn to tribal societies by the recurring tribal revolts. The tribal world, therefore, figured in official perceptions mainly as an adjunct to the counter-insurgency measures of the state. The perception gradually changed due to on improved understanding of tribal society (Gupta, 2001). Tribes were then recognized as a worthwhile subject of study. In the 19th century a few British Administrators evinced keen interest in the ethnography and anthropology of tribal areas. W.W. Hunter (1868) in his '*Annals of Rural Bengal*' wrote about the tribes of Beerbhum and Santhal Paragana. Other important works included Col. E.T. Dalton's '*Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*' (1872); H.S. Risley's '*Tribes and Castes of Bengal*' (1891); and G. Archer's '*The Santhal Rebellion*' (1945). F.B. Bradley-Birt in 1903 wrote '*Chotanagpur: A Little-known Province of the Empire*' which is a detailed description of social, cultural and economic life of the various tribes residing in Chotanagpur plateau.

The *Ranchi District Gazetteers* prepared by the efforts of T.S. Macpherson and M.G. Hallett throws light on physical aspects, history and people of Chotanagpur and also give necessary statistical accounts. W.W.Hunter in vol. XVII of *Statistical Account of Bengal* had given a detailed description about aboriginal tribes of Chotanagpur and Singhbhum district viz. the Kols, the Hos and the Mundas.

The early British administrators had their own prejudices against the tribals. They looked at the problems of the tribals with western standards and values. Hutton had therefore, rightly remarked that in the early days of the British rule the policy of the British administrators was detrimental to a great extent to the economic conditions of the tribals. Out of sheer ignorance the British neglected their rights and customs. Treating the tribals and non-tribals of India as a homogenous unit the British did not try to create institutions, rules and regulations for the tribals on a different basis (Mathur, 2004, p.170). Reactionary and ill conceived legislations like Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 made the conditions of Adivasis worse. This Act stated many communities of craftsmen, traders and pastoralists to be criminal tribes by nature and birth. After the enforcement of this act, these tribes were supposed to live in notified village settlements and were not allowed to move out without a permit. The village police kept a continuous watch on them and many officials prepared notes and description about the activities of such tribes. Notable works in this regard are of E.J. Gunthorpe '*Notes on Criminal*

Tribes Residing in or frequenting the Bombay Presidency, Berar and the Central Provinces' (1882); G.W.Gayer '*Lectures on some Criminal Tribes of India and Religious Mendicants*' (1910); F.S.Mullaly '*Note on Criminal Classes of the Madras Presidency*' (1912); M. Paupa Rao Naidu '*The Criminal Tribes of India*' (1905) and M. Kennedy '*The Criminal Classes in India*' (1908) etc.

Gradually they realized their folly and adopted the concept of the protection of tribal ethnicity. Denzil Ibbetson writes in this regard: 'Our ignorance of the customs and beliefs of the people among whom we dwell is surely in some respects a reproach to us; for not only does that ignorance deprive European science of material which it greatly needs, but it also involves a distinct loss of administrative power to ourselves.'¹

The Role of Christian Missionaries

The Charter Act of 1813 allowed the Christian missionaries to conduct their activities freely in areas under its control. Missionaries undertook activities of education, health services and attempted to convert the tribes into Christians. Missionary work in Chotanagpur owes its origin to Johannes Gossner, a scholarly Bavarian priest who in 1844 sent 4 young missionaries to work in Ranchi district. In 1855, first Christian Church was established in Chotanagpur. Two Missionary Schools the Roman Catholic Mission (under Father Constant Lievens) and the Gossner Lutheran Mission – continued working side by side in Chotanagpur. (Sahay, 1968)

Mass conversions took place among the tribals of the Chotanagpur Adivasi belt. For the missionaries the translation of the Bible in the local languages was an urgent need for evangelization. In 1868, Rev Hahn prepared a Kuruk Grammar and Dictionary. The Gossner Mission started a printing press in Ranchi in 1882. Dr. Alfred Nottrot's Translation of the Bible in Mundari in 1876 was a pioneering contribution to the Mundari language and literature.

The concerns of the missionaries were not exclusively conversion of souls. Aware of the root cause of the Adivasi rebellions, "The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act" (1908), empowering to prevent land alienation of the tribal land by non-tribals, was drafted by Fr. J.B. Hoffmann and was entirely enacted by the British Govt. This act was later extended to the land ownership of the tribals even after Indian independence. He also established "Catholic Mission Cooperative Credit Society of Chotanagpur" (1906) and "Chotanagpur Cooperative Stores" (1913). A large number of families became beneficiaries and escaped the clutches of the landlords and the moneylenders. The Catholic Sabha founded in 1928 gradually evolved into Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938, covering the whole of Chotanagpur. It put the foundation of the Jharkhand movement and the creation of the state in 2000. (Kanjamala, 2014, pp.118-22) He is also the celebrated author of the 16 volumes of '*Encyclopedia Mundarika*' (1924-1938) encompassing in its pages the whole culture and civilization of the Munda people.

The Norwegian L.O. Skrefsrud (1840-1910) of the Gossner Lutheran Mission who arrived in India in 1863 toiled in the Santhal Paragana for half a century. He is one of the pioneers who powerfully argued for the preservation of the local culture and indigenization the Santhal Church. His many publications included *The Grammar of the Santhal language* (1873) and the translation of the New Testament in Santhali (1880). The society for the propagation of the Gossner started work in Ranchi in 1869. The Dublin University Mission entered Hazaribagh in 1892 and it started the first Degree College, St. Columba's College in 1899. (Mahto, 1971)

Therefore, the entry of Christian Missionaries resulted in documentation of tribal life and history.

Ethnographic Survey of India

The decennial census of India since 1881 and the publication of district gazetteers prepared the ground for an ethnographic survey of India. In August 1882, the Census Commissioner suggested that an Ethnographic survey of the customs and occupations of all important tribes and castes throughout British India should be undertaken. Therefore, an anthropometric inquiry was conducted to describe the distinctive characteristics of selected tribes and castes in Bengal according to the methods prescribed by the French anthropologists Broca and Topinard. The results of these inquiries were recorded in the four volumes of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal (1891)* prepared by the efforts of Herbert Hope Risley.

In December 1899, when the preliminary arrangements for the census of 1901 were under consideration, the British Association for the Advancement of Science recommended to the Secretary of State, that certain ethnographic investigations should be undertaken in connection with the census operation. Sir Arthur Godley's in his letter dated 16 January 1900 admits that 'the native conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. For the purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease, and of almost every form of executive action an ethnographic survey of India, and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants.'²

The scheme was sanctioned in 1901 and a Superintendent of Ethnography was appointed for each province. Consequently R.V. Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal conducted ethnographic survey in Central Provinces and Berar; W. Crooke in North-West Provinces and Oudh; R.E. Enthoven and Sir James Campbell in Bombay; and E. Thurston in South India. W.H.R. Rivers studied and published monograph on the Todas of Nilgiri hills (in Tamil Nadu) in 1906 and his student Radcliff Brown conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Andaman and Nicobar islands. Brown's book '*The Andaman Islanders*' was published in 1922.³

Studies by Indian Ethnographers

The 19th century British historians played a crucial role in provoking a nationalist reaction of

writing tribal history. Sarat Chandra Roy, who is known as father of India ethnography, published many books on tribes of Chotanagpur such as '*The Mundas and Their Country*' (1912), '*The Oraons of Chotanagpur*' (1915) etc. Kali Kinkar Datta's '*Santal Insurrection*' (1940) was one of the earliest discussions of tribal uprisings.

The importance of history for modern India is reflected in the eagerness with which, soon after independence in 1947, state-sponsored projects for writing the history of freedom struggle were launched. During colonial rule, Indian ethnographers had sometimes felt restricted in their research. This was not only due to technical or administrative problems (access to archives, funding of institutions, realization of excavation projects, and so on) but also to the general feeling of insufficiency and backwardness created by colonial historiography, esp. with regard to their assessment as a political community (Gottlob, 2011).

K.K. Datta dealt with the tribal rebellions such as the Kol (that is the Munda and Larka Ho) uprising of 1831, the Santhal Hul of 1855 and Birsa Munda's Ulgulan revolt (1898-99) in detail in his *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar* (1957) which has been published in 3 volumes. Datta considered the chief reason behind the rebellion to be the economic grievances of the people against their oppression and exploitation by the moneylenders and merchants. Dhirendranath Baske [*Saontal Ganasangramer Itihas*, 1976] is another prominent ethnographer who tried to change the image of Santhal tribes evolved by British. These ethnographers sought to disprove the notion of Oriental Despotism by demonstrating the existence of republican form of government among Indian aborigines.

Following in K.K. Datta's footsteps, three of his students, J.C. Jha, S.P. Sinha and K.S. Singh published monographs on similar movements in Chotanagpur (Gupta, 2001, p.81-82). In his work '*The Kol Insurrection*' (1964), Jha reiterated the argument that 'the tribal unrest of 1831-2 was a crude form of protest against the changes and the outside influences- a gesture of despair.' (Jha, 1964, p.1) Jha says that the consequence of the revolt was the introduction of relief measures through Regulation XIII of 1833 whereby special rules were framed for the area which eased conflicts within tribal societies. Similarly he wrote in '*The Bhumij Revolt 1832-33*' the Bhumij revolt was 'a millenary or populist movement aimed at creating an ideal world' in which men would receive justice. (Jha, 1964, p. 187)

S.P. Sinha (*'Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan'*) and K.S. Singh (*'The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and his movement in Chota Nagpur, 1874-1971'*) are a few studies dealing with Birsaite movements. Sinha argued that the tribal world, economically subordinate, was culturally inferior to that of the Hindus and Christians. Birsa Munda therefore had to borrow elements of the dominant culture to raise the status of the subordinate group. K.S. Singh, on the other hand, laid emphasis on economic issues, which undermined

E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817

tribal agrarian structure (Gupta, 2001, p.81-82). He observed, 'the transformation of the Mundari agrarian system into non-communal, feudal, zamindari or individual tenures was the key to agrarian disorders that climaxed into religious-political movements of Birsa' (Singh, 1966, p.1). Three volumes on *Tribal Movements in India* edited by K.S.Singh are important contributions to the relatively scant literature on the subject. The first volume deals with the northeast frontier tribes, the second volume focuses on central and south India and the third volume confines itself to a survey of literature on tribal movements in different parts of the country.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this paper is to depict the necessity of discovering the past of the various tribes of India which has hitherto been neglected by historians. This paper aims to highlight the fact how ethnography can be used to reconstruct tribal history of India by giving examples of earlier ethnographic accounts of different tribes residing in Jharkhand.

Conclusion

Therefore ethnographic study, using colonial accounts and archival documents as well as non-traditional source materials like literature, oral testimonies and folklore will help historians to explore tribal history of India. Moreover earlier accounts reflect a biased outlook towards the tribes. The colonial accounts treated them as barbaric.

Therefore a re-evaluation of tribal history dealing with their settlement patterns, economic activities, social and political organization, dressing and food habits, beliefs, practices, rituals and customs hold out possibilities of interesting future research. On the contrary, the fact that tribal issues are apparently relevant in many parts of the country would call for more ethnographic, comparative and analytical efforts than has hitherto been the case (Berger & Heidemann, 2013, pp.1-10). It is in the light of these developments that history is increasingly viewed as being complementary to ethnography. Ethnographic fieldwork cannot simply be looked at in a synchronic fashion (as snap shot, unhistorical) but rather as a diachronic encounter. (Mukhopadhyay, 2019)

References

- Bates, C. (1995). *Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry*. In Peter Robb (ed.) *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (pp 219-259) Delhi
- Behera, M.C. (2019) *Tribal Studies: Emerging Perspectives from History, Archaeology and Ethnography*. In M.C. Behera (ed.) *Tribal Studies in India* (pp.1-31). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9026-6>
- Berger, P., & Heidemann, F. (Eds.) (2013). *The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, themes and theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Bradley-Birt, F.B. (1903) *Chotanagpur: A Little known Province of the Empire*, London.
- Datta, K.K. (1957) *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar in 3 vols.*, Patna
doi: 10.4324/9780367810344-4

Remarking An Analisation

- Gosden, C. (1999) *Anthropology and Archaeology: A changing Relationship*. London: Routledge.
- Gottlob, M. (2011) *History and Politics in Post-Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, S.D. (2001) *Peasant and Tribal Movements in colonial Bengal: A Historiographic Overview*. In S. Bandyopadhyay (ed.) *Bengal: Rethinking History* (pp.65-92) New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Hallett, M.G. (1917) 'Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Ranchi', Patna.
- Hunter, W.W. (1868) *Annals of Rural Bengal*. New York
- Hunter, W.W. (1877) *Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. XVII, London.
- Jha J.C. (1964) 'The Kol Insurrection'. Calcutta
- Jha J.C. (1965) 'The Bhumij Revolt'. Calcutta
- Kanjamala, A. (2014). *The Future of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845*. Eugene: Pickwick Publication
- Lee, R.B. (1968) *Comments*. In S.R. Binford and L.R. Binford (eds.) *New Perspectives in Archaeology* (pp.343-346) Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Mahto, S. (1971) *Hundred Years of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845*, Ranchi.
- Mathur, L.P (2004) *Tribal Revolts in India under British Raj*. Jaipur: Aavishkar Publishers.
- Mukhopadhyay, A. (2019) *Ethnographic Fieldwork: The predicaments and possibilities*. In R. Acharyya and N. Bhattacharya (ed.) *Research Methodology for Social Sciences* (pp.44-56).
- Sahay, K.N. (1968) *Impact of Christianity on the Uraon of the Chainpur Belt in Chotanagpur: An Analysis of its Cultural Processes*. *American Anthropologist*, vol. 70, pp.923-42
- Singh K.S. (2006) *Tribal Movement in India*, in 3 vols. Delhi: Lordson Publishers.
- Singh K.S.(1966) 'The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist: A study of Birsa Munda and his movement in Chotanagpur, 1874-1901', Calcutta
- Sinha, S.P. (1964) *Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan*, Ranchi
- Sreedharan, E. (2018) *A Textbook of Historiography*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Upadhyay, C. (2011) *Colonial Anthropology, Law and Adivasi Struggles: The case of Jharkhand*. In S. Patel (ed.) *Doing Sociology in India: Genealogies, Locations and Practices* (pp. 266-289). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Crispin Bates (1995) 'Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry' in Peter Robb (ed.) *The Concept of Race in South Asia* p.228
2. Quoted in Crispin Bates (1995) 'Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry'
3. See R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, *The Castes and Tribes of the Central Provinces*, (London, 1916); W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-West Provinces*

P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344

RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980

VOL-5* ISSUE-1* April - 2020

E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817

and Oudh, 4 vols., (Calcutta, 1896); R.E. Enthoven, The Tribes and Castes of Bombay, (Bombay, 1920); E. Thurston, The Tribes and Castes of South India, 7 vols.(Madras, 1909).

Remarking An Analisation