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The question of ‘tribes’ displaced by the partition of India 1947

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Abstract

The mass displacement and human tragedies during the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947 are not unknown to the history of contemporary India. Recent writings have sought to move past the conventional discussions of partition politics, instead emphasizing the refugee experience and the human tragedies through the use of diverse sources like oral histories, literature and so on. The present paper intends to probe an area largely unexplored in the post partition studies of refugees. Amongst many refugees, a significant number of Tribes migrated to West Punjab and Delhi post partition.

Keywords: Displaced, tribes, partition of India 1947

Introduction

Various communities such as Bauria, Bazigar, Barad, Banagala, Gandhila Nat, Bhils and Sansi migrated with other communities to India. These communities were also categorized under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. In 1947 some 128 Criminal Tribes totaling to a number of nearly 3.5 million were officially designated as ‘Criminal Tribes’. Although scattered throughout the country they were mostly present in the Northern belt. They were differentiated from other Criminal Tribes in a number of ways, firstly being mostly vagrant, low caste or out caste, they were held in particular abhorrence by the rest of the society and secondly, their criminal behaviour was passed on from one generation to next. Particular Criminal Tribes were mostly associated with particular types of crime. ‘The British accordingly saw tribal crime as a group phenomenon to be combated on a group basis.’ⁱ These were mainly nomadic communities and most of them were forced to settle on government land. Many of these tribes settled in West Punjab, especially Sansis and Bazigars. Bazigars have the highest population followed by the Sansis (who are distributed all over the state) then the Baurias. Nat and Gandhila have the lowest population and they are not distributed all over Punjab, in fact they are completely missing from Gurdaspur, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr, Fatehgarh Sahib and Muktsar.ⁱⁱ According to the study of Surveys on Refugees in East Punjab Bazigar and Sansi were the two major tribes who migrated to East Punjab as a result of Partition.

Even in 1947 these communities were labeled as Criminal Tribes. It was on 31st August, 1952 that the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed and these communities achieved their ‘independence’. ‘Many of them ironically celebrate this day as their independence day. These tribes since then had been struggling to get themselves included in the Schedule Tribes list.’ⁱⁱⁱ One community in one state has Scheduled Caste status and in another state has schedule tribe status this marks a confusion in the identities of these tribes/castes.

Birinder Pal Singh in his study of Criminal Tribes says that the status of criminal remained with them even after partition. ‘They got ‘independence’ on August 31st, 1952 when the tag of criminality was removed.’^{iv} They celebrate this day as their independence day instead of 15th August after which they are called denotified tribes or vimukt jatis. ‘These tribes since then have been struggling to get themselves included in the list of schedule tribes (STS)’.^v The status of the ex-Criminal Tribes of Punjab and even other states is a complicated one as some of these communities are listed under the scheduled castes and others as Scheduled tribe. For example Milind Bokil (2002) cites the case of phanse pardhis of Maharashtra who are STs there but their counterparts, the haran shikaris or gaon pardhis are listed as vimukt jatis.’ Similarly Banjaras of Maharashtra have the same problem, they are SCs in Karnataka but Vimukt jatis in Maharashtra.

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In Post-independence Punjab the Criminal Tribes had been included in the Scheduled Caste and since then the Vimukt jatis (ex-Criminal Tribes) have been struggling to remove the Scheduled Caste status and acquire a schedule tribe one. For which they have formed numerous all India level organisations, for example All India Denotified Tribe (Vimukt Jatis) Sewak Sangh. As mentioned by Roy Burman Scheduled Caste is seen as an administrative and political category by the constitution. It may therefore be the case that some communities such as these, which are considered as tribes by the anthropologists may not be scheduled as tribes under the constitution.

Apart from the issue of their inclusion in the Scheduled Caste or Schedule Tribe, these communities which came from West Pakistan at the time of partition carried multiple identities. i.e Criminal Tribes (up till 1952), refugees, and later Scheduled Castes. A report on the status of the Criminal Tribes in post partition Punjab mentions that there were a significant number of Criminal Tribe refugees who were wandering from place to place and indulged in crime. The government was trying to rehabilitate them and bring them under its control.

As the field of "Adivasi Studies," has become increasingly visible as subjects in debates around conversion, identity, indigeneity, and development. Therefore, it becomes even more relevant to mention it here. According to Sangeeta Das Gupta, it engages with archaeology, anthropology, agrarian history, environmental history, subaltern studies, indigenous studies, aboriginal studies, and developmental economics but adds to these debates that are specific to the Indian context. Dasgupta also makes another important point that figures such as Ambedkar, Phule, and Periyar were revived in the effort to rewrite the history of caste and reshape the concept of India as a "modern" democracy. During this process. Dalit literature and autobiographies were regarded as important sources of authentic information about Dalit experiences and realities. However, the tribal communities were unable to revive a similar historical narrative.

The concept of "tribe," especially from the mid-1800s, was mainly viewed in colonial records as a step in an evolutionary process, representing a society different from caste-based ones, often seen as primitive and backward. However, this understanding evolved over time due to various factors such as official perspectives, changing racial assumptions, tensions within anthropology, colonial governance ideologies, and interactions with indigenous populations. Scholars like Damodaran argue that colonial discourse, instead of creating imaginary scenarios, actually analyzed real differences in landscapes. For them, the colonial portrayal of tribal people as simple and in need of protection had some historical truth. On the other hand, scholars like Devalle, Skaria, and Guha highlight the complex and interconnected social relationships existing before colonization, which were overshadowed by the concept of tribe.

According to Chetan Singh in his article 'Conformity and Conflict; Tribes and the Agrarian system of Mughal India, points out that there was continued participation of tribal populations in the socio-economic processes that had been fundamental to the stabilisation of agrarian society. The tribal people were not irrelevant to the Mughal agrarian system. Village communities of Mughal India probably lived in close proximity to tribal societies.

Modern scholars on medieval Indian history have chosen to

under play tribes as a distinct entity and accommodated them in other categories. Despite this limitation Chetan Singh makes attempts to understand the structural dynamics underlying the changes which seem to have occurred in tribal societies during medieval period. He chose Punjab as his centre of study. He says that structural change in the tribal societies could not have been a matter of concern for tribal alone. A close relationship existed between tribal and pastoral with a sedentary and commercialized agrarian society of medieval Punjab.

At the political level the missionaries were closed collaborators with the colonial administration they justified the British rule and created a new wave of support for the backward communities of India the Christians were very loyal subjects for the British after 1860 the official policy of non-interference in religious matters was broken which was not to be applied on the tribal population because they were outside if the Hindu Muslim fold. So the missionary activity was encouraged and supported by the British class.

K.S Singh in his article 'Colonial transformation of Tribal society in Middle India', says that tribal society lost its unique character like other castes and communities tribal were also transformed by colonialism in a very profound sense. He stresses that there was an uneven impact of colonialism which could be understood with the specifics of local structured which included the tribal. First, there was colonisation and establishment of settlements (bhums) by peasant castes, who were encouraged by the Mughal rulers and zamindars to reclaim lands and offered various incentives for this purpose, of by other categories of immigrants. Many tribes, such as the Bhils, Minas, Kolis and Gonds were recognised as dominant communities by the Mughal empire. According to the above mentioned scholars 'tribes' of Punjab and North West India were never out of the mainstream caste structure especially with regards to communities like Bhils, Meenas and Kolis.

This paper aims to explore the historical linkage between Partition migration and its impact on Adivasi/ tribal communities. Documenting the history of these communities poses a challenge, as primary sources often do not adequately highlight their experiences. However, given the recent advancements in Adivasi Studies, there is a growing relevance in recounting their history through alternative means, particularly oral narratives. The second part of this paper will delve into oral history narratives from two tribal communities displaced by the 1947 Partition.

Rampyari 83 hailed from Gunna Pind, a village in Punjab's Jalandhar District, where Sansis were resettled. I had pursued the story of how this community was rehabilitated here, they were also 'ex- criminal Tribes'. Here are Rampyari's recounted experiences in her own words.

I came to Gunna Pind after marriage with my husband in trucks via Amritsar and Jalandhar where we stayed in a camp, and finally Gunna Pind where we were allotted land in lieu of land owned by them in Sheikhpura. Yes we got land, as much as we had in Pakistan a little bit only. We have 2 Qilas right now, initially we had lesser land which we sold it off. Through agriculture we could not survive. These houses that you see were built by labour and hard work of my husband.¹ I migrated after marriage with my husband and children, my parents, brothers and sisters are

¹ Rampyaris interview conducted at Gunna Pind, on 24th September, 2014.

still in Shiekhupura, Pakistan. My relatives have converted to Islam, despite this she often visited her family in Pakistan. I must have been around 16 when I came here after Partition. I had to restle in this village with my husband. But one thing I regret till today is leaving my family behind in Sheikhpura. I have very fond memories of my maiden life. I missed them a lot. But what can I say? A woman's life is always full of sorrows. I have done a lot of labour, I worked on agricultural land. All this physical hard work has taken away my bodily strength and now look at me I am unable to maintain a healthy life. Despite all this I don't have much regrets. But I always missed my family. Rampyari could not speak much as her health was deteriorating however her story of Partition experience highlights some of the key experienced as a first-hand account of a tribal women who migrated to East Punjab after Partition.



Photo 1: A photo of Rampyari (2013), one of the very few refugees who live at Gunna Pind

Balvinder Ram 75 was another refugee from the Bhil Community I met at Delhi's Kala Pahar Colony. He narrated history of Partition with compassion however, he too had many regrets.

When I came from Pakistan district (Sindh). I was very young but I still remember those days vaguely. We walked for four to five days, day and night under the supervision of the military. Many were killed amongst us also. Young girls were picked up by the Muslims, those days were really bad I hope God does not show anyone such days. We were provided with some ration when we arrived in Jodhpur. All this was there but the aid that we required had not been

given. We had left everything behind, we did not bring anything only a pair of clothes, we did not have the strength to carry anything more. And we belong to the lower caste, we were 'Criminal Tribes' under the British. We are tribal. We hardly got education, our children are also not educated much. This is another injustice done to us. Our fore fathers were criminals they were bow and arrow shooters. The British were good to us they helped us we never had any kind of conflict with them. I remember the time when there were riots and 'azadi ki ladai' (independence struggle) side by side.

We have always been loyal to Congress and voted them in every election. They helped us a little in the beginning. When we first arrived here we had mud huts only. But today with hard work and labour we are able to live in a pucca house. My life journey has been difficult. I have had a very long life but now I am satisfied and live with my sons and grandchildren I can say life has been hard but it as also been kind.

Balvinder Ram also talked about how the British assisted them by allotting land to them for improving their status of 'Criminal Tribes' to that of a cultivator. The British government had allotted land to 'Criminal Tribes' for the purpose of 'reform' in the nineteenth century. This was done for 'the urge to 'reform' these communities which emerged out of a 'compulsion to raise revenue from land and the administrator's commitment to private enterprise'.²



Photo 2: Balvinder Ram (2011), at Kala Pahar Karol Bagh, New Delhi

Conclusion

Several key aspects have emerged, recently in sparking debates among historians regarding tribal/adivasi and Dalit

² Radhakrishna, Dishonored By History 'Criminal Tribes' and British Colonial Policy, 2001.p.7.

history. This paper made attempts link this history to the history of Partition. It was therefore an attempt to register, write or make a contribution towards inclusion of such history into the practice of history writing. The paper utilized oral history to advocate for the inclusion of new or parallel narratives in Dalit / Adivasi history writing. This approach requires moving beyond traditional historical methods of history writing and instead utilize oral history or first-hand accounts from Dalit and Adivasi communities. This paper therefore, used oral history to register or reclaim the right of new or parallel history writing with regards to Dalit or Adivasi history. As already mentioned by scholars like Sangeeta Dasgupta, we see a trend in the growing importance of Dalit autobiographies as significant sources for writing and rewriting history. Which has been absent in Adivasi history. Therefore, by registering the experiences of Balvinder Ram and Rampyari both belonging to ex criminal tribe groups, who had overlapping identities of caste/class and tribe in post-independence India. This paper brought to light experiences of such groups and made them part of the existing historiography of on oral history of Partition.

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ⁱ A.J. Major, 'State and 'Criminal Tribes in Colonial Punjab: Surveillance, Control and Reclamation of the 'Dangerous Classes' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Jul., 1999), pp. 657-688

ⁱⁱ Brinder Pal Singh, Ex-Criminal Tribes of Punjab, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 51 (Dec. 20 - 26, 2008), pp. 58-65

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibbetson, op.cit., p.271

^{iv} Brinder Pal Singh, op.cit

^v Ibid.