



# Indian Tribes: Their Distribution, Groups and Sub-Groups: Causes and Variations

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## Abstract:

Article 366(25) of the constitution of India refers to the schedule tribes of our country. The Tribal communities are scheduled according to article 342 of the constitution and has been declared by the President of India. They are called denotified tribes or schedule tribes of India. Total scheduled tribes constitute 8.6% of the country's total population in 2011 census, according to the list of Ministry of Tribal affairs. The characteristics of the schedule tribes are the following:

1. Distinctive culture.
2. Geographical isolation.
3. Indications of primitive culture.
4. Shyness with the contact to other communities.
5. Backwardness.

India is a country with vast diversity and culture. Tribes in India are distributed all over the country from Foot-hills of the Himalayas to land dip of Lakshwadeep (India), from Hills of the North-east state to the plains of Gujarat. Highest percentage of tribes in Madhya Pradesh & UT state of India with largest percentage of the tribal population of its overall population are Mizoram (94.4%) & Lakshadweep (94.8%). There are total 705 tribes in India. Out of these 176 tribes are inhabited in central India.

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**Keywords:** Tribes, Distribution, Culture, Geographical, Ecological, Socio-Economic, Administrative

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## 1. Introduction

We have had a general outline about the tribes of India and we will deal with distribution of the tribes of India in detail. Now we will discuss the distribution pattern of Indian tribes and how they are classified into different groups and sub-groups based on various criteria.

These criterion are based on their geographical location, language, physical attributes, economy and the degree of incorporation into the Hindu society. After that, we will discuss the causes of the variations in the distribution pattern of the Indian tribes.

## 2. Objectives

There are following objectives of this article.

1. Get a panoramic view of the Indian tribes;
2. Understand the principles upon which their classification is based; and
3. Map their distribution on the basis of their geographical location, language, physical attributes, economy and social structure.

## 3. Distribution of Indian Tribes: Groups and Sub-Groups

India contains an unparalleled variety of ethnic groups, patterns of culture and modes of living. The

"People of India" Project of the Anthropological Survey of India has identified about 705 tribal communities of India out of which 174 have been identified as sub-groups. They number about 10.43 crore according to the 2011 Census comprising about 8.6 per cent of the total population of the country. Now, we will look into the distribution patterns of the tribes of India.

Even though there is not a single and definite system of classifying the tribes of India, attempts have been made by different anthropologists from time to time to distribute the tribes. There are mainly two categories to classify the tribes. They are:

**a) Permanent traits**

This includes factors like geography/ territory, language, physical/racial attributes and size.

**b) Non-Permanent or acquired traits**

This includes factors like economy or subsistence pattern and the degree of incorporation into the Hindu society.

### **3.1 Geographical**

The tribes of India are dispersed widely over geographical territory and scholars have attempted to arrange them along the regions they inhabit. Based on the geographical location and the tribal demographical set-up, anthropologists have tried to chalk out a zonal classification or a regional grouping of the tribes of India.

For instance, B.S. Guha has classified the tribes of India into three zones:

- a) The north and north-eastern zone in the mountain valleys and eastern frontiers of India.
- b) The central or middle zone occupying the older hills and plateaus along the dividing line between the Peninsular India and the Indo-Gangetic Plains including the converging line of the Western Ghats.
- c) The southern zone comprising the whole of the Peninsular India.

D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan in their book Introduction to Social Anthropology (1956) have also offered a similar classification. They are Northern and North-Eastern Zone, the Central or Middle Zone and the Southern Zone.

S.C. Dube has demarcated four geographical regions including the North and North-Eastern Zone, Middle Zone, the South Zone and the West Zone.

Taking into consideration the zonal classification given by different anthropologists from time to time and keeping in mind the geographical, ecological, socio-economic, administrative, ethnic and racial factors, L.P. Vidyarthi put forward a five-fold classification system which included the following: the Himalayan region, Middle India, Western India, South India and the Islands.

**(I) The Himalayan region** is sub-divided into:

- A. North-eastern Himalayan region comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and the mountaineous region of West Bengal including Darjeeling.
- B. Central Himalayan region comprising the Terai areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.
- C. North-Western Himalayan region comprising the states of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

The tribes inhabiting this region are the Akas, Daflas, Apatanis, Mishmis, Khamptis, Singphos, Kukis, Khasis, Garos, Lepchas, Bhotias, Tharus, etc.

**(II) Middle India Region** comprising the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. About 55% of the total tribal population of the country lives in this region. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Juangs, Kharia, Khonds, Bhumijis, Baiga, Muria, Marias, Mundas, Gonds, Santhals, Oraons, etc.

**(III) Western India Region** comprising the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa and the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Barodias, Bharwads, Bhils, Damors, Dhanwars, Dhodias, Girasias, Gonds, Katkaris, Koknas, Kolis, Minas, Siddi, Warlis, etc.

**(IV) South India Region** comprising the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Chenchus, Irulas, Paniyans, Kurumbas, Kadars, Todas, Badagas, Kotas, etc.

**(V) The Island Region** comprising the islands of Andaman and Nicobar in the Bay of Bengal and Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea. The tribes inhabiting this region are the Jarwas, Onges, the Great Andamanese, North Sentinelese, etc.

K.S. Singh has offered a similar classification of tribes of India into the North-eastern India, Middle India, Southern India, North-western Himalayas, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands Zones. Within this geographical classification, there is a lot of disparity in regards to the distribution of the tribal population of the country. We can come across a very high concentration of the tribal population in the eight states of the central or middle India comprising of about 85 percent of the total tribal population. This is followed by the eight north-eastern states comprising of about 11 percent while the rest is distributed over the states and union territories of the northern and southern India.

However, if we try to see the ratio of the tribal population to the total population, we can find that the ratio is high in the north-eastern states except Assam. It ranges from 64-95 per cent in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh and between 30-35 percent in Tripura and Manipur. The ratio is over 90 percent in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep whereas it ranges from 22-23 percent in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh in central India. In the rest of the country the ratio ranges from as low as 1-12 percent.

Besides the zonal and geographical distribution, tribes have also been classified on the basis of their ecological habitat. On this basis they are classified as those who live in the hills (Hill Karbis, Hill Tiwas of Assam), plains (Bodos, Singphos), forests (Kadars of Kerala), rural, urban and industrial areas.

### **3.2 Linguistic**

Besides classifying the tribes according to territory, they are also classified according to language or linguistic categories. Four broad language groups have been identified amongst the tribes of India which are Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman.

Tracing the linguistic map of India, we can see that the tribal people of India speak different languages in different regions and groups. One can find that the Dravidian language is spoken in southern India and in some pockets in central India; the Austro-Asiatic language is spoken in some pockets in the north-eastern Himalayan region of Meghalaya, in Nicobar Islands and most part of central India; the Tibeto-Burman language is spoken in the entire Himalayan region whereas the Indo-Aryan language is spoken in the remaining areas of the rest of the country.

L.P Vidyarthi and Binay Kumar Rai in their book “The Tribal Culture of India” put forward the following classificatory system of the languages of Indian tribes:

#### **(I) Dravidian**

All the tribes of southern India as well as the Gonds and Oraons of central India speak languages belonging to the Dravidian language family. The Gondi language spoken by the Gonds who spread from Uttar Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh and from Maharashtra to Orissa belong to this language family.

Other languages belonging to this family is the Kui language which is spoken by the Kandh of Orissa, Kurukh spoken by the Oraons of central India, Tulu language spoken by the Malerus of Karnataka. The languages spoken by the Todas, Palliyans and Irulas of Tamil Nadu, the Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh, and Kadars of Kerala also belong to the Dravidian language family.

## (II) Austro-Asiatic

The Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya speak in language belonging to the Austric language family. Apart from them, the Mundas (Jharkhand), Santhals (West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa and Tripura), Hos (Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh), Saoras (Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Orissa), Bondos (Orissa) and Korkus (Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) speak languages belonging to the Austric or Mundarian language family as it is sometimes called.

This family is again sub-divided into the following sub-groups:

- (A) **Mon-Khmer Branch:** Languages of this family are found in certain pockets of the north-Himalayan region of Meghalaya spoken by the Khasis and the Jaintias as well as the Nicobarese of the Nicobar Islands.
- (B) **Munda Branch:** Santhali spoken by the Santhals, Gutob spoken by the Gadabas; Kharia of South Munda sub-branch; Korwa spoken by Kodaku; Korku of North Munda sub-branch, Juang of the central Munda sub-branch
- (C) **Kherwarian group:** Ho

## (III) Tibeto-Chinese

This family is again sub-divided into the following sub-groups:

(A) Siamese-Burmese: The Tai group of people including Khamptis and the Phakials speak languages belonging to this family.

(B) Tibeto Burman:

1. Tibeto-Himalayan Branch: Bhotia, Khampa, Memba, Ladakhi spoken by the Mons; Kagati, Sherpa
2. Western sub-group of Prenominalised Himalayan group: Chamba, Lahauli spoken by Lahaula; Swangli; Kinnauri spoken by the Kinnaura
3. Non- Prenominalised Himalayan group: Rongke spoken by the Lepchas; Toto spoken by the Totos
4. Arunachal Branch: Hrusso spoken by the Akas; Miri spoken by the Miris, Mishmi spoken by the Mishmis, Nocte; Sulung, Tagin
5. Assam-Burmese Branch:
  - a) Bodo group: Kachari, Dimasa, Garo, Mikir spoken by the Karbis, Koch, Dowyan spoken by the Tiwas, Rabha
  - b) Naga Group: Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Sema, Rengma, Lotha, Konyak, Maram, Phom,
  - c) Kuki-Chin Group: Hmar, Koireng, Lamgang, Monsang, Moyon,
  - d) Paite; Vaiphei; Zou
  - e) Kachin Group: Singpho

Apart from the Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya, all the other tribes of north-east India and the Himalayan region speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family.

## (IV) Indo-Aryan

The tribes of Gujarat, Rajasthan and the Indo-Gangetic Plain speak languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family. Some of the languages belonging to this family include Chattisgarhi, Gujarati; Marathi, Assamese; Oriya; Baigana spoken by the Baigas; Banjari spoken by the Banjaras; Bhili spoken by the Bhils; Dardic spoken by the Broqpas; Gujjari spoken by the Gujjars; Lamani spoken by the Lambadis; Baghelkhandi spoken by the Paos.

The entire group of Austric language speaking people and 80 percent of the Tibeto-Burman speaking people are identified as tribal communities. On the other hand, a meagre 3 percent of the Dravidian language speaking people and almost 1 percent of the Indo-Aryan speaking people are identified as tribal people.

There is yet another language family spoken by the tribes of the Andaman Islands like the Great Andamanese, the Onges, Jarawas and the Sentinelese. They are loosely called the Andamanese language family.

### **3.3 Racial**

On the basis of the physical attributes, anthropologists have tried to categorise the tribal population from time to time. But due to the lack of available knowledge and scanty direct evidence, the determination of the racial genesis and affinities of the tribal communities of India is a very complicated task.

The first attempt to categorise the Indian tribal communities in a scientific manner based on the racial characteristics was done by Sir Herbert Risley. He classified the entire population of the country into seven racial types which are Turko- Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid and the Dravidian. No separate classificatory scheme for the tribal population was given.

A more recent attempt of classification was given by J.H. Hutton, S.C. Guha and D.N. Majumdar out of which the most accepted classification is that offered by S.C. Guha who listed six main races with nine sub-types. They are as follows:

- 1. Negrito**
- 2. Proto- Australoid**
- 3. Mongoloid**
  - A. Paleo-Mongoloids- Long-headed and Broad-headed
  - B. Tibeto-Mogoloids
- 4. Mediterranean**
  - A. Palaeo- Mediterranean
  - B. Mediterranean
  - C. Oriental type
- 5. Western Brachycephals**
  - A. Alpinoid
  - B. Dinaric
  - C. Armenoid

### **6. Nordic**

Guha has also drawn conclusions as regards to the racial composition of the tribes of India. They are:

- (I) Negrito:
- (II) Proto-Australoid
- (III) Mongoloid

At present the racial composition of the tribes of India include the following:

**(I) Proto-Australoid:** The tribes of middle India like the Mundas, the Oraons, the Hos, the Gonds, the Khonds, etc. belong to the Proto-Australoid stock.

This group is characterized by dark skin colour, short to medium stature, low forehead, sunken nose, dark complexion and curly hair.

**(II) Mongoloid:** The tribes of north-eastern India and the Himalayan region belong to this group. They have the typical features of straight hair, flat nose, prominent cheek bones and almond shaped eyes with the epicanthic fold present and yellowish skin colour. They have medium stature, high head and medium nose.

(III) Dravidian: The tribes of South India like the Kadars, the Irulas and the Paniyans.

(IV) Negrito: The Great Andamanese, Onges, Sentinelese having frizzy hair have Negrito strains. The Siddis who migrated from the African shores of course belong to the Negrito group.

### 3.4 Size

Anthropologists have also attempted to classify the tribal groups according to their demographic size. It is interesting to note that tribal populations of India vary immensely with regards to their respective sizes. On one hand we find tribal communities like the Gonds, Bhils, (both designated with their generic names) with a population of about forty lakhs each followed by the Santhals with a population of more than thirty lakhs. They are followed by the Oraons, Minas and the Mundas who number about more than ten lakhs each. They are followed by the Hos, Khonds and the Kols with population strength of more than five lakhs.

Yet another more than forty tribes, comprising about ten percent of the total tribal population of India have a population ranging from one to five lakhs. These are the Adis, Baigas, Bhumijis, Bodos-Kacharis, Dhodias, Garos, Kacharis, Kharias, Kharwars, Khasis, Kolhas, Korkus, Lodhas, Mizos, Rabhas, Saoras, Tripuris, Warlis, Yenadis and Yerukulas, to name a few. On the contrary there are communities like some Andamanese groups who number even less than hundred each. There is a lot of variation in size even within the tribal groups who are in between these two categories- somewhere between less than 1000 to less than a million.

### 4. Conclusion

Tribes of India living in different geographical area with different racial groups, and different linguistic. Such as Dravidian tribes which belongs to the south India. Like Todas, Kaddasr, Paliyan tribes. Speaking languages are Tamil, Telugu. Proto-Australoid include Oraons, Bhumij, Santhals belongs to the central India. Tribes of north eastern consists the mongoloid features. Yellowish skin, presence of the epicanthic fold. Straight and light hair colour. Tribes of north eastern state speak languages such as Bodo, Garo, Khasi. Economy such as shifting cultivation, pastoralism, settled cultivation and industrial laborers prevail. They all are still low in their economic system due to low technology. Areas of these peoples are still undeveloped. So, there is difference between the level of socio-cultural integration. Tribes who are still in their traditional form they are backward in socio-economic condition. But tribes who are assimilated with the Hindu social orders. Under the influences of neighbouring community. They are better in socio-economic status. Due to advancement in technology. Tribes as a whole are still backward in technology and education. Majority of the tribal society is strongly patriarchal society. Only few societies having matriarchal society such as Khasi and Garo tribes of north eastern state. Now a day tribes have tried to come up with the market with the help of govt. They are making handicraft, artifacts, handloom apparels, pickles and traditional foods and selling them in market. So economic conditions are improving. Based on the racial characteristics was done by Sir Herbert Risley. He classified the entire population of the country into seven racial types which are Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid and the Dravidian. No separate classificatory scheme for the tribal population was given.

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