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While ascertaining the tribal identity of a community, India must keep in mind that tribal communities are never static and they have been undergoing shifts at a fast pace

Adiyar, a community predominantly found in northern Kerala and residing in Kannur district was denied the Scheduled Tribe (ST)

status by authorities (without any prior notice) on the grounds that they have lost resemblance to their counterparts in the Wayanad district.

A study conducted by Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) concluded that the Adiyar community of Kannur has lost its 'tribal or primitive' characteristics and now resembles the Hindu community of Thiyya who belong to the OBC category. The community fought a legal battle in the high court resulting in the restoration of their rightful ST status in 2015.

The Vetan and Vetar communities from Kollam, Paththanamthitta and Thiruvananthapuram districts of Kerala are fighting a similar battle. The two communities have been demanding ST status since the 1960s.

In the earlier days, the Vetan community lived in forests and was engaged mostly in hunting. In the course of time, many of them settled in rural areas, which gradually led to a division among the community: one section lived in forests and the other in towns. The government categorised the community as Malavetan and Vetan. While the Malavetans are categorised as ST, the Vetans are counted in the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. The Vetans are demanding ST status as they see themselves as part of the Malavetan community, and, are equally marginalised in terms of educational and economic achievements.

Both these instances raise certain important questions about the complexities and dynamics of tribal identity in contemporary times, and our hegemonic conceptualisation of the same. Central to this are debates on the criteria of defining ST, reservations, marginality and backwardness as well as the

ideas of geographical boundaries and the notion of contemporaneity. In both the above-mentioned cases, members of the same community but living in a particular area (urban) were denied tribal status because it was said that they did not fulfil the criteria for ST, unlike their counterparts living in the hilly/forest regions.

It is important to note that Article 366 (5) of the Constitution doesn't give any criteria for specification of a community as a Scheduled Tribe. It states that "Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities which are deemed under Article 342 of the Constitution to be Scheduled Tribes".

Article 342 only specifies who has the powers to deem a community (or part thereof) as being Scheduled Tribe. The definitions and concepts of tribal communities adopted in the 1931 Census were taken into consideration while developing such rules and have been

adhered to since. Later in 1965, the Lokur committee made a recommendation carrying forward the definitions followed by the colonial state to recognise the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in India.

Terms like indigenous communities, *adivasi* and tribes are heavily contested in India. The term 'tribe' is a colonial and Brahminical construct, which denied the contemporary and simultaneous existence of certain communities and resulted in the labelling of these communities as primitive, backward and uncivilised. By the 19th century, 'tribe' began to be considered not only as a particular society but also as a particular stage of evolution. The idea of 'tribe' was based on the presumption that, these communities are isolated, self-contained and primitive groups that are geographically isolated and distanced from the caste or Hindu social order. Scholars have since pointed out how difficult and complicated

the application of such notions are in the context of South Asia, and, particularly, in India.

The particular regions and their specific historical, socio-cultural and economic milieu have shown varying patterns of migrations and social interactions. Therefore, one has to move beyond the 'white man's colonial imagination' while exploring and defining the meanings attached to the term tribe. We have to consider the nuances of the Indian society without denying the historically rooted marginalisation and injustice against tribal identities.

We must begin by recognising that tribal communities are never static and they have been undergoing shifts in the socio-cultural realms of current times at a fast pace and that they continue to be in extremely vulnerable situations in terms of social development and material progress.

The captive forces of the market economy, the influence of non-*adivasi* religions, processes like modernisation and globalisation, the resistance movements and the increasing control of the State over forests and invasion of *adivasi* areas and resources by the mainstream communities have played a decisive role in these changes. It should also be remembered that such changes are met with resistance and struggles from the tribal communities, aimed at preserving their identity and consciousness. In order to emphasise this 'shifting' nature of the *adivasi* communities, sociologist Andre Beteille had used the concept 'tribes in transition'. Amita Baviskar rightly challenges this by pointing out that the idea of transition is an oversimplification and it stems from a linear understanding of change.

Should we then reconsider our definitions in the context of wider social changes in these communities and their attempts to preserve

their cultural specificities without denying them their rightful status and affirmative support from the government? Are the existing criteria sufficient to define the tribal communities in the contemporary context? How should we consider the idea of time in identifying and designating a community as a tribe? Is it more important to protect non-tribal assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes about tribal communities or create a space for the power of tribal self-determination? It would be safe to say that unless we make space for the perspectives, histories, and knowledge of tribal communities we will continue to deny them their rights and access to justice.