

## Indian Tribes and Issue of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

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**ABSTRACT** The dilemma in tribal administration has been centering round the issue of tribal development in a right direction. But what is right or fair is the big question. There is lot of controversy over the present day development paradigm of tribal development. The tribal people have been facing problems from both inclusion in to and exclusion from the dominant development paradigm of the country. The tribal societies have experienced religious and other cultural inclusion in to the so called universal or dominant culture and consequently faced the problem of identity crisis. Exclusion from infrastructure and health and education etc has led them to a situation where they find it difficult to cope with the outside world at present day situation. The paper tries to find out what were the means and aims of tribal exclusion and inclusion and the consequences of the same with some instances.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Defined

The term 'social exclusion' and 'social inclusion' are two terms most widely used in recent years by politicians, social scientists and the public as well. The term social inclusion was originated in French social policy in the 1970s. It came into play in the 1980s economic crisis (Benn 2000: 310) when state sponsored republican tradition of solidarity was in vogue (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997: 414). By the year 1990 the term was theorized by scholars like Bourdieu and Luhmann. The latter clarified the concept in the following terms:

*The concept of inclusion means the encompassing of the entire population in the performances of the individual function systems. On the one hand, this concerns access to these benefits and, on the other, dependence of individual modes of living on them. To the extent that inclusion is achieved, groups disappear that do not or only marginally participate in social living (Luhman 1990: 34).*

With this adoption, social exclusion moved on to the political agenda in Europe in the 1990s. The conceptual development of social exclusion draws from two leading social policy traditions, that of social democracy, in terms of concerns surrounding inequality and equal opportunities, and that of the social catholic concern for social ties in the community and within the family. The term 'social exclusion' is ambiguous and contested. Definitions range from little more than a

re-naming of poverty (Burchardt et al. 1999: 228) to more broad based concepts based on a lack of, or inability to participate in society. Rodgers (1995: 46-7) visualized exclusions which include, 'exclusion from goods and services', 'labour market exclusions', 'exclusions from land' and 'exclusion from security'. Discussion of social inclusion and exclusion also relates to citizenship debates, particularly in terms of the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. Atkinson and Davoudi (2000: 434), for example, refer to the differentiation between: *the European social model [which] places considerable emphasis on maintaining social solidarity and ensuring that all individuals are integrated into, and participate in, a national social and moral order* and *the concept of poverty which lies within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, where... a liberal model dominates [and] is based on the idea that society is fragmented and composed of individuals who are in constant competition with one another.*

The definition of 'Social exclusion' was offered by the European Foundation that suggests to represent the other end of the spectrum to 'full participation':

*"[Social exclusion is] the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live."*

Since the Social Summit in 1994, there has been increasing attention paid to the usefulness of the concept to concern with poverty, inequality and social justice in the developing country context by, among others, the Institute of Inter-

national Labour Studies, the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank (IILS 1994; Figueiredo and de Haan 1998).

Silver (1994) distinguished three paradigms of social exclusion, depending in particular on the ways social integration has been conceptualized, and associated with 'theoretical and ideological baggage'. In the 'solidarity paradigm' dominant in France, exclusion is the rupture of the social bond between the individual and society that is cultural and moral. The poor, unemployed and ethnic minorities are defined as outsiders. National solidarity implies political right and duties. A 'specialization paradigm', dominant in the US, and contested in UK is determined by individual liberalism. According to liberal individualistic theories, individuals are able to move across boundaries of social differentiation and economic divisions of labour, and emphasize the contractual exchange of rights and obligations. In this paradigm, exclusion reflects discrimination, the drawing of group distinctions that denies individuals full access to or participation in exchange or interaction. A 'monopoly paradigm' is influential in Britain and many Northern European countries, and views the social order as coercive, imposed through hierarchical power relation. Exclusion is defined as a consequence of the formation of group monopolies.

The term 'disadvantage' has been widely used for conceptualization of 'social exclusion'. Hence disadvantage refers to circumscribe the opportunities and life chances of individuals and groups in a given society. Now, poverty is recognized to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing income, assets, education, health, dignity and voice. But, still poverty continued to be understood as a single phenomenon that is the root of social exclusion in economic terms.

Sociologists, on the other hand, have paid greater attention to identity-based forms of disadvantage. Such disadvantage reflects the cultural devaluation of groups and categories of people in a society. The identity in question may relate to a distinct and bounded group of people who are defined by their distinct cultural practices and shared way of life. Caste, ethnicity and religion are examples of such group identities.

In practice, the dominant sections of society construct and re-construct the members of these groups or categories as persons of lesser worth through beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour

which disparage, stigmatize, stereotype and discriminate.

Group based disadvantages give rise to 'horizontal' model of inequality where the inequalities in question cut across economically defined strata and differentiate the ability of different groups and categories within society to access valued resources and opportunities.

The two paradigms thus focus on quite distinct understanding of disadvantage: one relating to lack of resources and the other to identity-based discrimination.

Another dimension, the spatial disadvantage may lie in the remoteness and isolation of a location which makes it physically difficult for its inhabitants to participate in broader socio-economic processes or it may operate through the segregation or urban environments and the 'sub-cultures' of violence, criminality, drug dependence which often characterize the territory excluded neighborhoods.

Social exclusion has to be seen as an institutionalized form of inequality, the failure of a society to extend to all sections of its population, the economic resources and social recognition which they need in order to participate fully in the collective life of the community. Social exclusion is a kind of mechanism by which 'access' and recognition is granted or denied. Economic theory suggest the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' groups as one way of understanding access and exclusion. Open groups are those which achieve their objectives by expanding their membership because the benefits they seek increase with the increased membership and outweigh the recruiting bringing new members. Closed groups like trade unions, on the other hand, achieve their objectives by restricting their membership on the basis of some agreed set of rules.

Another way to look at the mechanism of exclusion is the distinction between 'given' and 'chosen'. While chosen groups are obviously ones which individuals join of their own accord, and which they are also able to exit of their own accord, they are not all equally 'open'. 'Given' groups, on the other hand, are by definition are closed groups with the additional features that they are less easy to join and less easy to abandon. The socially ascribed character of certain group identities and memberships, which given them the appearance of being 'given' and unchangeable, reminds us that there are group-

based constraints on individual choice and that not all such constraints are economic in nature. People are not always in a position to choose who they are, where they belong and how they wish to be perceived for persons who have little to do with what they own or earn.

The United Nations concept on social inclusion speaks as follows:

*“An inclusive society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law”*. It is to note that the concept of social inclusion is based on subjective understanding of what ‘right’ or ‘fair’ is. This notion or understanding differs across countries, societies and individuals. Thus there is no uniformity in the use of the term social inclusion. There are also certain issues related to it.

For some, inclusion and exclusion works simultaneously. An individual or a society may be included in one desired area but may be excluded in another important area. This may be as a consequence of the inclusion or as a norm etc.

There is also note of self-exclusion theory that says that human beings are socially constituted and as such are product of culture, social apparatus and their environment and then they can never take responsibility as individuals for their own marginalization. But it can be argued that though individuals are products of their social circumstances they do have space in which they can make decision about changing these circumstances.

Thus, in totality, social exclusion denotes the following characteristics of a society at large or individuals at least.

- i) Inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life.
- ii) Distance and alienation from a so called mainstream society.
- iii) Isolation from major societal mechanisms which produce or distribute social resources.

Social exclusion is a broader concept. It is a related concept with unemployment and poverty, but not an identical one with them. Social exclusion is a relative term particular to a place or country on certain circumstances. It is always related to a social agent or agents. Exclusion is also dynamic term depending upon people’s immediate condition.

Social inclusion and social exclusion can also be viewed in terms of market economy. In this sphere the phrase social exclusion is used to describe a situation as also to focus on a process, which excludes individuals or groups from livelihoods and rights, thus depriving them of sources of well-being that have been assumed, if not taken for granted, in industrial countries.

On the contrary, the literature of developing countries has sought to study marginalization or deprivation of majorities through a focus on poverty and inequality. Market base proposition says that it may exclude people as consumers or producers or both. Market excludes people as consumers or buyers if they do not have any income, or sufficient income, which can be translated into purchasing power. Markets exclude people as producers or sellers if they have neither assets nor capabilities. In addition, market excludes both as consumers and producers and as buyers and sellers if they do not accept, or conform to, the value of a market system. The most obvious example of such exclusion is tribal population or forest communities in a market economy.

## 1.2 Impact of Inclusion and Exclusion

Though it is generally presumed that exclusion is detrimental and inclusion is for good, in practice this may not be true. Coercive inclusion by market or by dominant social system in any form may cause harm to the social web of the new entity. Coercive inclusion may be in the form of child labour, women in wage labour with differential payments, putting tribal people in unskilled and unprotected labour force and as immigrant workers etc. For similar reason, exclusion is not always bad. To those who do not accept the value of the market system and do not resemble or depend on a social system outside their traditional domain, any voluntary exclusion from those entities should be perfectly accepted.

Both from social and market perspective discourse on inclusion and exclusion of tribal people cater relevance in present situation. Because, it is said that exclusion and poverty are mostly interrelated. Conventional poverty indicators reveal that there is a strong correlation between being indigenous or tribal and being poor or extremely poor. Tribal people are more likely to have lower income, poorer physical living conditions,

less access to health care, education, and a range of other services, worse access to labour, land and capital markets and worse returns to work as well as weaker political representation. The poverty and social exclusion experienced by tribal people are largely due to discrimination at social and institutional level during colonial and post-independent era. The present paper tries to highlight the characteristics of inclusion and exclusion of tribal societies in Indian situation.

## 2. THE TRIBAL WORLD

### 2.1 Definition of Tribal Societies

On the basis of certain specific characteristics some human societies are defined as tribal societies across the world. These characteristics are not uniform for every society. But there are certain characters universal to all of them; at least they had derived from such a social arrangement at certain point of time. According to the ILO Convention No. 169 indigenous and tribal peoples are those peoples "whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations".

### 2.2 Indian Tribal Groups

In India we come across many social groups or societies who might have some of these characteristics. But all of them are not denoted as tribal groups. The term tribe is more functional in nature in India. There was a purpose to declare or recognize some societies as tribal societies through constitutional Act of the country. Thus when we talk of tribe we talk of the Scheduled Tribes, the social groups recognized or listed in the Schedule of the Constitution of India. Therefore, by definition, the Scheduled tribes are those social groups who are "*such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution*".

This delineation shows that there is no characteristic definition regarding tribal groups in India in our constitution. The recognition is done on purpose or functional aspects only. But it is generally accepted that in selecting the tribal

people the following characters are taken some sort of priority:

- indications of primitive traits,
- distinctive culture,
- geographical isolation,
- shyness of contact with the community at large,
- and backwardness.

The criteria are not spelt out in the Constitution but have become well established. It subsumes the definitions contained in 1931 Census, the reports of first Backward Classes Commission 1955, the Advisory Committee (Kalelkar), on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee), 1965 and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendment) Bill 1967 (Chanda Committee), 1969.

### 2.3 Tribes are at Different Levels of Transition

Culture and society are dynamic. Culture and society change over time due to several factors - exposure, invention, experimentation and change in surrounding environment. The tribal societies are also no exception. When we observe the social status and cultural components of tribal societies we find that in our country the tribal societies are in different stages of transition. They are in different stages of picking up or imbibing components of modern world like education, economic activities, dress and recreation, food habit, health seeking behaviour and world view etc. There is lack of uniformity in these domains among the different tribes in different regions of the country. This specific character of the tribal groups bears the importance in that while making policies for social and economic development one has to be aware of such levels of transition. For example, we have come across highly educated tribal groups in north eastern states like Mizoram whereas, areas like Orissa and Bihar the tribal people are very less educated. The situation is same for many other social indicators of development among tribal groups across the country. Thus, tribal policies must be group specific or region specific. Flatly generalized uniform policies may not serve the purpose

### 2.4 Tribal through Ages

Tribal societies are the earliest known societies in human history. Though there is hardly

any clear mention of tribal societies in ancient times we get mentions of some groups of people in epics and other ancient literature who have often been depicted as *Rakshas (devil)*, *Ashuras (demon)*, *Dashyus (robber)* and even *Banors (monkeys)*. Most probably those were the self-contained exclusive tribal groups who did hardly mix up with other people – culturally as well as physically. We have the mention of the marital relations between some non-tribal epic heroes or ancient kings and princes with those of tribal girls. In most of the cases the girl remains at her native place, gives birth to children and start a new dynasty or genealogy accepting some non-tribal traits for the next generation to come.

The cultural and geographical isolation between tribal and non-tribal societies, most probably, continued to be there till the medieval period. We come across, in India, the instances of political relation between tribal chiefs and the kings and rulers of a bigger territory throughout the medieval history. In most of the cases such relations were friendly and symbiotic. The kings did not interfere with the traditional boundary of those tribal groups and also in their social and political domain. In some cases it has been seen that the tribal chiefs accepted the superiority of the kings and helped him with tribal army where necessary and in return the king assigned him the status of brave warrior, the Kshatriya status.

The political assimilation of tribal world with the non-tribal domain was very important in terms of transition of tribal world. It was during this period of political assimilation the components of Hindu religion penetrated the tribal world. It is interesting to note that though the legends and literatures depicts the tribal and non-tribal cultural assimilation as an ancient phenomenon, in reality, those legends and literatures actually flourished in this time period only. There are ample evidences that the religious preachers had adapted numerous such parochial legendary stories in tribal societies fulfilling the interests of social and political ambitions of rulers as well as the religious fraternity in different times.

By the later part of the medieval period, following the increased accessibility to once inaccessible terrains, several tribal dominated areas were annexed to mainland empires disturbing the very core of tribal societies in the country. But the major blow to the tribal societies came after

the advent of the colonial rulers. The colonial rulers did not have direct confrontations with the tribal people in the beginning. The tribal territories were supposed to be transferred to colonial empire as and when a kingdom encircling the tribal territory was annexed into the British territory. It was during the later part of the colonial rule, when the issue of exploitation of huge natural resources reserved in tribal lands came into being. The colonial rule is characterized by special kind of tribal administration. We come across two trends in colonial rule towards the tribal administration — inclusion and exclusion. Both of these policies had some specific impact on tribal societies.

Inclusion of tribal societies into colonial regime was characterized by breakdown of traditional political system and the means of social control among the tribes leading to social disintegration and cultural maladjustment. Inclusion also exposed tribal societies into a network of economic activities alien to the existing tribal economy. The tribal people were not compatible with the laws introduced by the alien rulers and in the course of time they lost their forest, land and support of life and mainly reduced to a position where they had to look forward to others for their development.

On the other hand, the colonial administration introduced excluded area policy to keep away certain tribal territories from rest of the country. Though these were excluded areas, the administration did not stop penetrating the tribal traditional domain. Many of such traditional social control organizations were made defunct or un-called for leading to social disintegration. Such exclusions led to stagnation of most vital aspects – the economic progress and education etc and also infrastructure development. The story of exploitation and deprivation did not come to light at all.

## 2.5 Exclusion in North-east India

Most of the parts of the north-east India were administered with a different administrative framework for the benefit of colonial ruler, especially aiming at extracting natural resources, mainly forest resources, without any intervention. These administrative policies deprived the tribal people of the rightful access to land and forest to a great extent. Stebbing (1983), reports that in the early nineteenth century the great forest

tracts in Assam were unexplored. "Even till the 1850's, no steps had been taken towards the conservation of forests in Assam...those accessible beings still worked in the wasteful fashion which had been in force for centuries." Later on the British administration carried out the preliminary inquires and investigation into the forests of the Eastern Himalayas including Sikkim. It is important to note that the British account of the forestry situation in the Northeast is confined to forest production plans, and even conservancy was primarily aimed at securing a permanent supply of timber through a state monopoly. This is obvious by the extent of involvement by the British sawmill companies and the tea companies. It is reported that even the forests that were under the traditional chief and most of the forests on the southern slope of Jayantia Hills were leased to the government and the privilege of felling timber in Jeerang Forest was sold to the government for three years.

The *First Annual Forest Report* mentioned that the Conservator of Forest in Bengal, who was also responsible for the Assam Forest, had proposed a transfer of several thousand of square miles in Assam to the forest department (FD) without any previous demarcation or definition of the boundaries. The government of Bengal then ordered the early selection and demarcation of better forest, and also ordered that the Deputy Commissioner was to manage the remaining forest tracts. Even in this period, there were extensive forest tracts in which numerous hill tribes carried on *jhum* cultivation (Swidden or slash and burn). As per the *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India*, the area of forest in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Assam Range was very large. The government forests were divided into two classes: "Reserve" and "Un-classed State Forest." In the latter, a very large portion is bare of timber.

At the general administration level, two of the most significant administrative classifications made by the British were the demarcation of the frontier districts from other districts of the Northeast by what was known as the "inner line" and the declaration of certain areas as "Scheduled Areas." The concept of the inner line was introduced in the 1870's when commercial activities by British subjects in conjunction with the frontier tribes were found to be adversely affecting not only the revenue derived by the government from the forests, but also threatening dis-

turbance with the hill tribes. Thus, to protect the British interest in trading in rubber forests in the plains beyond the *mehals* or settlements, the *Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act* was enacted in 1873. This act made it lawful for the state government to prescribe the inner line in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sib-sagar, Lakhimpur (Garo Hills), Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, and Cachar. No Indian citizen could venture beyond this prescribed "line" without a pass under the hand and seal of the Chief Executive Officer of the district. Further, the act also made it illegal for any persons, not being native to the districts, to acquire any interest in the land beyond the said inner line without the sanction of the state government or such officers as the state government might appoint on their behalf. The history of the special system of administration for the tribal areas in the Northeast can be traced back to 1874 with the *Schedule Districts Act*, which was possibly the first measure adopted to deal with these areas as a class. The act enabled the executive to extend or exclude "Scheduled District" areas from the normal operation of any ordinary law. In the Northeast, the act declared the province of Assam and the 'Paragana of Manipur,' a "Scheduled Tract." The *Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1918* also referred to these areas. This report suggested that the political reforms contemplated for the rest of India should not apply to these areas as they were too "primitive," "backward," and "there was no material on which to found a political institution." The scheduled tracts were thus excluded from the purview of the reforms and were administered by the heads of the provinces. The *Government of India Act of 1935* classified scheduled areas into excluded and partially excluded areas with the excluded areas being directly under the personal rule of the governor and the partially excluded areas being within the ministerial responsibility with the governor having the power to overrule the ministers.

## 2.6 Tribes as a Unique Self-Excluded Group of People

By traditional definition, tribal societies are self-sufficient (though not strictly in economic front). Self-sufficiency means they need not to interact with non-tribal societies for their social, cultural and physical existence. This very nature of tribal people kept themselves away from the

rest of the other societies. The tribal people had crude form of trade relations with non-tribal world, but that was not sufficient to penetrate their social core. Thus, it is quite clear that exclusion of tribal societies was a self-imposed criterion.

Contrary to this fact, the caste societies were the integral part of Hindu caste system. The Scheduled Castes, generally the lowest in the social rank, have socio-cultural and economic dependency on other caste groups. Thus exclusion of such societies is due to its social customs, work attachment and legendary mandates by social authorities present among the greater Hindu society. The perceived and manifested exclusions are mostly due to the fact that the other part of the society thinks them not suitable to be in the same line of interaction. From these two explanations one can draw the difference of exclusion:

*Tribal groups are excluded groups because they are not a part of the greater traditional Hindu society. At best they may be termed as the parallel segments in a different domain. Scheduled Castes, on the contrary, a part and parcel of the greater Hindu society, are excluded as neglected parts thereof.*

Therefore, it is opined that in the process of nation building process, while the Scheduled Castes needs uplifting in social status, the tribal societies need a meaningful integration and positive inclusion.

### **3. THE PROCESS OF TRIBAL ABSORPTION (COERCIVE INCLUSION?) IN INDIA**

Inclusion of tribal societies into the greater Indian society happened to be a gradual process, especially in social and cultural front, which was mostly a predecessor to political aggression of non-tribals into tribal domain. Numerous instances show that a parochialization of universal religious entities and ideologies occurred in tribal domains, where at certain point of history, Hindu religious preachers penetrates tribal sacred world, give recognition to tribal gods and goddesses by assigning equal status, names of Hindu gods and goddesses and link them with parochial stories and legends. Thus the tribal people felt themselves as an integral part of the greater Hindu society. In many cases tribal gods and goddesses were given a sub-ordinate sta-

tus in relation to the Hindu gods and goddesses making a path for social and economic and political aggression and expansion. Due to such reason we may come across same stories of a same god happened to be appeared in different parts of the country making a legendary connection between the tribal people and the non-tribal people of the other parts of the country.

Several examples can be drawn from ethnic history of people of Assam. For instance, the Ahoms (one of the Mongoloid groups of Assam but not recognized as scheduled tribe), who ruled Assam for a long six hundred years had their own tribal tradition. They used to slaughter animals to appease their won traditional gods and goddesses. Very often the Ahom kings used to bring literate people from the mainland India and established them in their kingdoms granting special privileges like free hold grants of land, servants and so on. In the same spree the Ahom kings established some Brahmin families too. (Gogoi 1991; Barua 2002) One of such most important events was the establishment of the 12 Bhuyans families from the erstwhile Gaur. Sri Sankardeva, the famous social and religious reformer, was born to one of these families in 1449 AD. He imbibed the ideas of Hinduism in a new form and preached *nava-vaishnavism* or *Mahapurusha* Dharma in the state. He and his followers translated and adapted several Hindu religious books, legends and epics in parochial form and popularized the mainland Hindu myths and legends even among the tribal people. He established religious monastery called *Satras* at different places and village monasteries at village level called *Namghar*. This tradition embraced most of the ethnic groups including the tribals in the later period. Aniruddhadeva, a forbidden disciple of Sankardeva, preached the Mateks and the Morans of upper Assam and they became famous as the Moamorias. The sect included some tribal groups as well as other mongoloid groups who are not recognized as tribal. They became so strong that it revolted against the atrocities done by the Ahom king in the state.

The intrusion of components of Hindu tradition in the Ahom royal familial domain dates back to AD 1397 when Sudangphaa, who was known as Bamuni konwar, was sworn in as Ahom King. It is said that Ahom king Tyao Khmpti had some conflicts with one of his wives and she was sentenced to death. But as she was pregnant at that time, the queen was deserted in the river Brah-

maputra on a raft. She was rescued by a Brahmin in some place in lower Assam. The queen gave birth to a baby boy. In due course, the king died without an heir. So the royal court brought the boy back and made him king. As he was brought up in a Brahmin's family he was known as Bamuni konwar. Obviously, the prince imbibed lots of Brahminical ideologies and he brought in his foster father's family into the royal domain. It is said that several Brahminical rituals and rights penetrated the Royal domain with this event.

Historians say that the influence of Brahminical ideologies increased day by day. But it took nearly 100 years for the Hinduism to enter into the royal administration. Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539 AD) was the first king to accept Hinduism as royal religion and accepted the title "Swarganarayan" as to denote the king. King Susenphaa (1603-41) or Pratap Singha accepted the Hindu name and title "Singha" as well to denote the kshatriya status of the Ahoms. The Ahom royal family started tracing their lineage from the Lord Indra as the legend says that the ancestors of the Ahoms, Khunlug and Khunlai were the descendent of Lord Indra and a lower caste woman called Sama who landed from heaven in a place called Mungri-Mungra. The Ahom God Lengdon was equated with lord Indra at the influence of Hinduism (Barua 2002)

By this period the Nava-vaishnavism flourished in the region to a great extent. It received overwhelming support from the common people. At one point it became successful to enter the Ahom royal domain and King Jayadhvaj Singha or Sutamala (1648-1663) accepted this religion. The king was not an efficient ruler and it is said that he preferred following religious norms to state administration. He was defeated by the Mughals (Mirjumla) and became famous as Bhogonia Raja (Bhogoniya = refugee). King Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) negated the expansion of the vaishnavism; he accepted Saktism as an ideal form of religion for royal group and came heavily on the Vaishnava religious *gurus* and *Satras*. The royal atrocity on a group of Vaishnavite people called moamoria became extreme during the reign of King Rajeswar Singha and his queen Phuleswari Kunwari which led to the eruption of Moamoria revolt that paved the way for decay of Ahom rule in the state (Gogoi P 1968; Gogoi L 1991; Gogoi P2006; Guha 1983, 1991).

Another royal family that traces its origin to Hindu deities is the Koch kings. The Koches

ruled lower Assam and a part of Bengal parallel to the Ahoms rule in Assam. The Koch community is of mongoloid origin and has most of the socio-economic features that exhibits by the plains tribes of Assam. The legend says that a tribal person called Hariya Mech, who was a Mech Kachari (a tribal community of Assam) once, was tilling his land. While his wife went to provide him breakfast in the field she saw her husband resting under a tree. She fed him breakfast. After having breakfast Hariya insisted on having sex with her. She complied and came back home. But to her horror it was not her husband. The real husband came back home with anger for not having food and drink. While he came to know the incident he left home. At night Lord Siva came in Hariya's dream and told him that it was he who had done that to her wife and advised him not to get angry at his wife. He also foretold that the son to be born would be the king of a new country. Thus the son born to her became King Biswashingha in due course of time and established Koch kingdom (Sarkar 1991). His son Naranarayn was the most powerful king and he patronized Nava-vaishnavism propagated by Sri Sankardeva. Numerous tribal people converted into new religious ideology leaving their traditional tribal practices and become Koch community. Brewing and drinking of liquor, eating of pork and sacrificing animals and fowls to appease gods etc were the traditional practices they left behind and tried to become caste society, a part and parcel of Hindu religion.

There are many other legends that get parochial, links local tribal communities to the greater Hindu culture. One of such legends links all Kachari tribes to the legendary hero of Mahabharata, Bhima. It is believed by the Kacharis that the Pandavas, while in exile, came to Hidimbapur (presently known as Dimapur) and Bhima killed Hidimba, the king of Hidimbapur. But Hidimba's sister Hidimbi fell in love with Bhima and at the insistence of mother Kunti they got married. Bhima stayed back there for a year, they got a son called Ghototkoch. Ghototkoch laid his life in the battle of Kurukshetra for the Pandavas. The descendents of Ghototkoch became the Kacharis. And the Kacharis feel proud to be called themselves kshatriyas (Endles 1911; Pulloppillil and Jacob 1997; Pegu 2004; Roy Babul 2002).

But the popularly known Hidimba temple is in Himachal Pradesh. Hadimba Temple in Manali is one of the most important temples in the re-

gion. This temple was erected in 1553 and is dedicated to Goddess Hadimba. The legend of Hadimba says that

Hadimba, a 'Rakshashi' in the Mahabharat has been deified and is worshipped in this area. According to Mahabharat 'Hadimb Rakshash' ruled some of the sub-mountainous tracts of the Himalayas. His sister was Hadimba or Hidimbi. In their wanderings the Pandavas, along with their mother, after escaping from the wax house unhurt came to the territory of Hadimb Rakshash. Bhima fell in love with Hadimba, the sister of the ruler. Bhima could marry her only after killing the brother. The pair-lived in the valley for about a year after which Bhima joined his brothers and mother. Hadimba gave birth to a son who was named 'Ghototkachh'. Till Ghototkachh was a minor, Hadimba looked after her country. She retired to the inner hills, for meditation, when her son Ghototkachh, a great warrior took over the country. Ghototkachh was a good administrator. Dhungri was the place near Manali where Hadimba had resorted for meditation. A temple of Hadimba in 'pagoda' style was raised and she became Devi Hadimba. Hadimba had supernatural powers owing to 'tapashya' and was kind to her people. Hadimba became the patron-deity of the Rajas of *Kullu*. The Tilak ceremony of every Raja of Kulu has to be done with the permission of the goddess and after worshipping her, a buffalo is sacrificed

Two more contemporary legends links the remote north eastern part of the country to the mainland culture of the country. One of these legends says that Banasura was the King of Sunitpur who had a beautiful daughter named Usha. While she came of her age the king kept her in an isolated and highly guarded fort called Agnigarh. One night she dreamt of a nice prince and urged her friend Chitralkha to get the prince. Chitralkha had magical power and she came to know that it was the grand son of Lord Krishna and she flew to Dwaraka and eloped Aniruddha to Agnigarh and marriage was performed secretly. Banasura came to know it and imprisoned Aniruddha. At this news lord Krishna got angry and came to Sunitpur with his force and had a war with Banasur. Banasura was defeated and Anirudha was released from prison. There are remains of ruins of an ancient structure which people believed to be the Agnigarh (Gait 1906). But similar kind of stories are also heard in other parts of the country. It is known that Bana is a gotra (clan) of Jats found in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in India. Banas are believed to be the

descendants of King Banasura. Their capital was at Bayana in Bharatpur. Usha temple, at Bayana, was built during the reign of Raja Laxman Sen, by his wife in memory of Usha. There is mention of Bana Chieftains along with Pallavas and as feudatories of Cholas in Tamil Nadu. Thus the authenticity of such stories are always in doubt and there is every possibility that such stories were the medium of hinuatisation of local people in remote areas.

Another legend talks about the marriage of lord Krishna with princess Rukmini. It is said that Rukmini was the daughter of king Bhishmak who ruled a kingdom Kundil in Sadiya of upper Assam (Gait 1906). Rukmini loved lord Krishna but her brother wanted to give her to another king of his choice. When Rukmini sent her intent to Lord Krishna he came all along from Dwaraka and had a fight with Rukmini's brother and the king who was supposed to marry Rukmini. They were defeated by Krishna and he married Rukmini. The ruins of Kundil township is still lying in Sadiya. The Chutiya communities and the Deori tribes of Assam claim themselves to the descendents of king Bhismaka. But it is widely believed at national level that king Bhismaka's kingdom was in Vidarbha, the north-east part of Maharashtra. Considering the difficult location of Sadiya in Assam no rational people will believe that there could be any marriage relation between the places like Sadiya and Dwaraka in those days.

Another major agent of tribal absorption was the Christian religion. Christianity and Tribal people are closely related in certain tribal pockets in India. Christianity entered India as a charity, working in disadvantaged localities, mostly following the colonial rule. Unlike Hindu method of tribal absorption, Christianity took a different route. Generally, it associated religion with humanity and sufferings, education and liberal views. Definitely, the incentives or the driving force was not religion and the legendry links to a greater world outside tribal domain. It was the basic requirements for survival – health, education and economic betterment etc.

#### 4. CONSEQUENCES OF TRIBAL ABSORPTION

##### 4.1 In Socio-Cultural Domain

In both the cases a lot of tribal traditional

entities and identities were either merged or lost to universal religious domain. Along with religion, social and economic front has witnessed a drastic change afterwards. Thus we come across a term called detribalization, giving rise to the problems of identity crisis. Identity crisis arises when a group of people does not left with anything unique of their own from others, except the undesirable differential treatment they receive from the others. Needless to say that there is a difference between the Hinduised tribal the Christian tribal groups' assertion. In case of the later, though most of traditional religious norms are lost, it hardly altered the traditional identities and cultural components of the converted tribal groups. Christianity could not evolve as a universal dominant culture among the tribal people and the ethnic and regional variations remained in the core. Thus being itself in a minority status in the country it could not absorb the tribal into the greater Christian society in real sense. Moreover, Christianity itself offers as a shield towards loss of identity being a separate entity from Hinduism and so called greater Indian culture. For the Christian tribes, the ethnic assertion, therefore, seems to be political in nature.

#### **4.2 In Economic Domain**

Inclusion of tribal world into the non-tribal domain was mainly aimed at or focused on economic exploitation of tribal people and their resources. Intentional or not, the tribal people lost their traditional authority over their economic resources — land, forest and other resources. Several land reform policies, land acquisition act and land distribution policies deprived tribal people of their livelihood. The colonial laws did not recognize the community or clan ownership over forest and land resources. In the absence of clear ownership title land and forest went to the State.

Inclusion also had great impact on tribal social and economic front. This was because the open up of tribal belts became the heavens of fortune runners who were basically non-tribal. During colonial administration numerous non-tribal people entered tribal areas as traders, service providers, contractors and money lenders etc. They exploited tribal people in various ways. The tribal people, ignorant of monetary economy could not cope with the changing situation and reduced to land less wage labourers in most of the cases. Large scale migration and malad-

justment occurred in tribal zones. The post independent inclusion of tribal territories into development map of the state has displaced lakhs of tribal people of their home, making them dependent on others mercy.

The excluded area concept was mostly used for political gain in terms of security and smooth administration in and around tribal areas in contrast to the general view that it was meant for the betterment of the tribal people. Since the exploitation of resources and the breakdown of tribal tradition were in vogue in those areas, the political exclusion had some definite impact on tribal societies. The economic development, education and infrastructure etc were suffered in those excluded areas, barring the areas where Christian missionaries were in operation.

#### **5. TRIBAL SOCIETIES WITHIN CASTE DOMAIN**

It has been stated that tribal people, at present, have experienced detribalization and identity crisis. In spite of being a self-sufficient groups of people in past, what have made them bound to come forward to get assimilated with non-tribal domain? To answer this question we have to look into several circumstances the tribal people once went through in their ethnic history.

It has already been stated that except a few tribal groups in the north east region, most of the tribal domains were either surrounded by the non-tribal domain or they were aggressively near to non-tribal entities. The political intrusion of non-tribal into the tribal authorities made the tribal people vulnerable to socio-economic exploitation. Thus, the tribal people were bound to come out of their traditional domain in search of better quality of life by accepting jobs, education and non-traditional life-ways. The already penetrated parochial religious identities and resemblances made the tour easier in the initial stage. But there were certain constraints. These constraints were in terms of social recognition. In a caste based ranked society, as it was prevalent during colonial and at the dawn of independence, the tribal people were unable to identify themselves and place themselves in social strata. They had to identify, at best, as either a caste people or an uncivilized lot directly coming from jungle having raw flesh in lunch — the adivashis or the barbarous, unacceptable for the greater world for meaningful social interaction.

Thus, the only way left open for the tribal people was to imbibe several caste components leaving behind their own traditional rites and rituals, customs and food habits and ways of life. There are numerous instances that show that by abandoning the tribal gods and goddesses, by leaving tribal customs, the tribal people could attain the status of lower caste groups in greater Indian society. In this rush for identity formation the tribal people lost a lot – language, customs and even their traditional names and surnames etc. The legendary stories flourished everywhere linking tribal people with the caste groups and caste literature (mythological) and greater Hindu traditions. We have come across several caste and tribal groups having similar customs and traditions in the lower strata of society. Definitely, such similarities are due to the process described above. Social scientists have forwarded a term very similar to this situation as Tribe-caste continuum.

A very general observation also can make it clear that the parochial legends found at regional level do not find their place in the domain of universal or all Indian level. There are different places known to people for those legends. In case of the Hinduisation of the Ahoms, it is quite clear that the legend of Lord Indra was just an improbable route. The Hindu religion never penetrated in the land from where the forefather of the Ahom came to Assam. It might have been due to necessity of the Ahom kings to accept a broader religious ideology to administer the conquered country in later period. The story of the Koch Rajbanshi certainly was coined by the royal priests who were the Hindu Sages. It is to be noted that a lot of legends and stories were adapted and translated to local language using local elements and examples so that the people at local level can accept them as their own. The Koch themselves nowadays do not accept their kshatriya status and deny the link with lord Siva or so on. The story of Gotatkoch is also not above controversy. For logical reason it is very hard to believe that the Pandavas would come to Dimapur from Hastinapur crossing Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The famous Hidimba temple in Himachal Pradesh reveals the improbability of north-east links.

The instances from Assam clearly show that a lot of ethnic groups imbibed Hindu ideology at different degrees. Some of them accepted it in totality and abandoned their traditional rites and rituals and observances. Some followed a dual form of religious belief blending both traditional

as well as Hinduism. Following the advent of the colonial rule the social and political scenario changed a lot in the state. This was a time of formation of greater Assamese society. Modern Assamese language was flourishing under the print media provided by the Christian Missionaries. To be able to speak and write Assamese language was a matter of pride and was attached to status in society for the non-mainstream Assamese (tribal) groups in the state. In this way many ethnic and tribal groups left their traditional dialects and accepted Assamese as their mother tongue. Acceptance of Vaishnavism was also a means to raise one's status in the newly emerged society. The advent of the British rule, open up of market and monetary economy, large influx of outsiders and break down of traditional system and domain among the tribal group made it appealing to catch a new identity and status in the emerging society. By imbibing Vaishnavism the tribal people were able to forward their identity to the non-traditional world. Many ethnic and tribal groups even discarded their traditional names and surnames so that they could not be recognized as tribal people or so. Thus a trend of massive detribalization occurred during this period. These were some of the instruments through which tribal people wanted to raise their status or in some of the cases the priest and preacher tried to find their followers so as to build up religious society where they can be benefited financially, physically and others.

The contemporary ethnic history of tribal India clearly reveals that this process of identity formation and detribalization was not at all a prudent move from the part of the tribal people. The newly created identity did not serve the purpose to the tribal people. Except a few, most of the tribal groups could not assimilate completely with caste traditions. The converted tribal were, too, placed in the lowest strata of the society and ultimately experienced more severe exploitation and negligence from the greater Hindu society and elite groups. The same way they also lost their age old dignity as a self-sufficient society. The tribal people who had their own gods and goddesses, had own priest and norms of religion, society and life-ways, who were independent lot, now had to obey alien dictatorship of higher castes and elites.

Frustrated at the deteriorated condition the tribal groups in many regions of the country have

started rejuvenate their age-old tradition to re-group and re-assert their unique or separate tribal identity. A process of retribalization and revivalism has sprung-up in the country at different times. Thus, an excluded identity began to appear in tribal world again. Tribal societies are now seemed to be smarter than before. The exclusion, now, is selective in nature. They are very much concerned about preservation of their remaining traditional culture and entity, while in economic front and skill formation they are inclusive in nature quite voluntarily. Thus, exclusion is now, again, self-imposed and it is basically meant for group identity preservation aiming at political, social and economic assertion.

Thus, we see a different kind of inclusion-exclusion dynamic in case of tribal groups in India. One has to be careful while talking about contemporary trends or dogmas of inclusion-exclusion because the tribal have a complex web of socio-political history to accept or deny them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Inclusion, Exclusion and Tribal Cultural Domain

Culture is a dynamic entity. There is constant change and also relative stability to maintain equilibrium. It accepts new components-invented, derived or borrowed, adapt to its own niche and merges it to enrich its totality. Thus, exposure to non-tribal domain at different period of ethnic history has earmarked numerous changes in tribal cultural component. The extent and intensity of such changes primarily depends on a society's need based integrity to its cultural components and life ways. A two way change- say for example, the exposure to new culture and change in surrounding environment, physical, social and economic, speeds up the change process in cultural domain of a tribal group. In a negative inclusion process these two forces are rampant and, therefore, cultural disintegration is rapid. This is a negative trend among the tribal groups, who in turn are in the verge of losing its unique identity and problems of identity crisis occur.

One has to be clear about the fact that no one can deny changes in society. But penetration by an alien culture that does not have basic linkage to the core of people's life ways in not a welcome change at all. Social scientists have mentioned that social and cultural disintegration

through such forces has made tribal people more vulnerable to severe exploitation throughout the country.

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