

BOOKS / COMMUNITIES

Uncivilising the Mind

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How anthropology shaped the
discourse on tribes in India

RICHARD KAMEI

An eight-volume study titled *The People of India*, which was compiled in the late nineteenth century, contained annotated photographs of Indian castes and tribes. THE PEOPLE OF INDIA / THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

AS AN OVERPROTECTED BRAHMIN boy growing up on College Road, I experienced my first culture shocks not more than fifty yards from the back wall of our house ... The entire culture of Bandikeri (the area behind our house where lived a colony of Shepherds, immigrants from their village, located a few miles from Mysore) was visibly and olfactorily different from that of College Road. Bandikeri was my Trobriand Islands, my Nuerland, my Navaho country and what have you. In retrospect, it is not surprising that I became an anthropologist, all of whose fieldwork was in his own country.

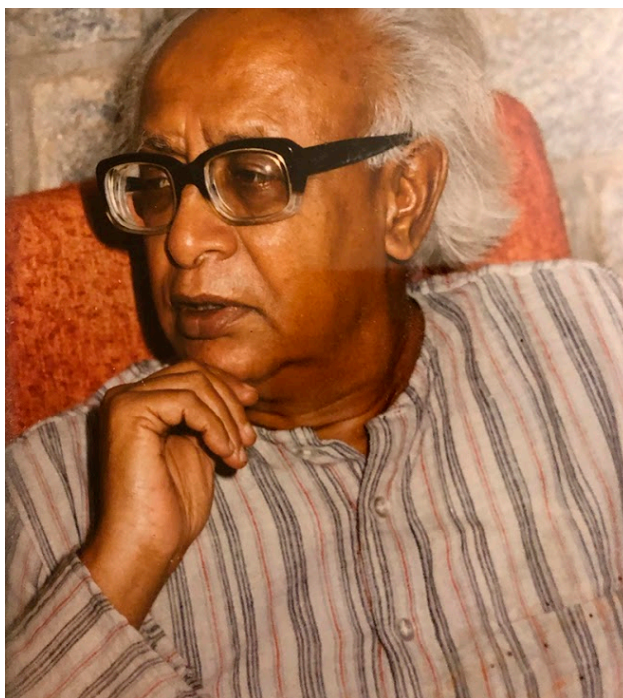
These lines crop up in *The Legacy of MN Srinivas*, a book celebrating the work of the titular sociologist and social anthropologist. Written by Srinivas's former student and colleague AM Shah, the book appraises Srinivas's work, stating that his "vigorous advocacy of village studies as critical for developing Indian sociology and social anthropology led many to identify him as the village studies man." Srinivas's description of his first experience with the communities behind his house figures as a passing aside in the text. Despite the "culture shocks" he may have had, as his self-description in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* suggests, Srinivas was lauded for focussing on Indian communities: "As an anthropologist, I am somewhat of a maverick in that I study my own culture and not any distant Other."

But the analogy he makes, between the residents of Bandikeri presenting him with the opportunity to study them—note the use of the personal pronoun too—and ethnic communities in New Guinea and around the world betrays his emulation of a lens inherited from Western anthropologists. Contemporary sociologists have addressed this at length. Sujata Patel, for instance, has acknowledged how Srinivas's focus on intensive fieldwork differed from his early mentor GS Ghurye's Orientalist perspective. But an article on a conference to mark Srinivas's hundredth-year birth anniversary claims she argued that "Srinivas could never free himself from the legacy of colonial ethnography, and asserted that such a legacy 'should be completely erased' from the sociological imagination of India."

Shah writes at length about Sanskritisation—Srinivas's widely cited concept of social mobility, premised on the idea that oppressed castes in India have increasingly imitated the culture and traditions of dominant castes. Shah himself issues a caveat of sorts, saying that he would like to be cautious on the subject of Sanskritisation among tribes, because of his lack of extensive field experience and insufficient reading on them. But Srinivas appears to have thought of Sanskritisation as having value when it came to aligning tribal people with Hindu society, with tribal

communities “absorbed” into Hindu society and “many of them entering the kshatriya order.” In his study *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, he writes that Sanskritisation tends to “weld the hundreds of sub-castes, and tribes all over India into a single community.” He continues, though, to elide the violence inherent to the existing hierarchy between tribes and Hindu society, writing that it is “easy to see how Sanskritic ideas and beliefs penetrated the remotest hill tribes in such a manner as not to do violence to their traditional beliefs. Caste enabled Hinduism to proselytize without the aid of a church.”

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The sociologist and social anthropologist MN Srinivas. His writings on Indian tribes betray his emulation of a lens inherited from Western anthropologists. COURTESY M.N. SRINIVAS LIBRARY

The tendency towards this kind of elision has a long history among anthropologists. NK Bose, who was, in the late 1960s, a Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, once acknowledged that it was “sad” and “unfortunate” that Brahmins felt racially superior and “never succeeded in giving to the vanquished a place equal to their own.” But he also wrote that “a view has wrongly grown up in some quarters

that all members of the Scheduled Tribes form an exploited class while all plainsmen are their exploiters,” warning that this may lead to “a feeling of exclusiveness and even conflict with the rest.” According to the sociologist Surendra Munshi, Bose and Srinivas wanted to accommodate tribal people into the fold of Hindu society, yet they differ in their approaches—where Bose advocated for absorption through acculturation, Srinivas focussed on cultural change and Sanskritisation. But Munshi’s criticism of both figures points to a common fault in their methodology:

my more serious criticism against Bose and Srinivas is that, lacking a general sociological theory of society and social change within the framework of which empirical data are to be collected, interpreted and transcended, they end with the transformation of the object of study into a theory that has conditioned the study itself. In other words, in their concern with the ideal sphere, they are compelled to accept the ruling ideas of the society, past and present, for providing them with the interpretation of the corresponding empirical reality studied by them.

My research interest lies in tribes and indigeneity. I am studying the dynamics of power, history-making, ethnic expression and contestation for my doctorate, with a focus on the early days of the Naga movement after the First World War. As part of my research, I have examined archives, colonial accounts and anthropologists’ writings, and encountered misrepresentations and misleading accounts of tribes in general, and the Nagas in particular. In trying to comprehend and correct the damages done to us, the tribes, in intellectual discourse, I saw that the writing of South Asian as well as colonial scholars caricatured tribal communities by misrepresenting or fetishising their existence, and sometimes overcompensating for earlier misunderstandings—all of which further pushed tribes into obscurity. In his article, “How egalitarian is Indian Sociology?” the scholar Vivek Kumar wrote that, over

the last century, twice-born castes are not only over-represented in sociological discourse but also dominate in terms of knowledge production, methodology and dissemination—this is apparent, he states, from the sources as well as the locales from which researchers collect field data. Besides this trend, I also noticed that tribal people entering academic environments today are distressed by representations of themselves they encounter in texts, and that these sometimes amount to micro-aggressions and various forms of discrimination. For one, tribal people are made to believe that they must give up their value systems, culture, religion, customs and aspirations, and that they must embrace the new order of the nation state to repay the favours done to them until they become self-sufficient through economic upliftment.

The accounts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists, and those written by political commentators, scholars and government officials, are critical to a discussion of how tribal people have long been positioned as antithetical to “civilised” societies. The political scientist Uday Chandra speaks of how primitivism, which he describes as “a type of liberal imperial ideology of rule that has justified the subjugation of populations and places described wild, savage or, simply, primitive,” has continued, despite changes in its approach, into the present day, whether in law, policy or discourse about development.

By the 1940s in India, when considering how to incorporate tribal populations into the nation state, there was a division between two camps—one promoted “isolation” and “protection” against assimilation, while the other was for “intervention” and “assimilation.” Verrier Elwin and Ghurye broadly represent these opposite poles. Elwin, at least initially, supported protectionist policies and recommended the “partial isolation” of tribes from non-tribal society. Ghurye’s approach, on the other hand, proposed that tribes must embrace and speak the language of the neighbouring community and integrate into “advanced” societies.

Despite their vast differences, anthropologists, including Elwin and Ghurye, as well as Srinivas and other Indian public figures and intellectuals, effectively erased or negated tribes' worldviews and beliefs. When discussing the materialistic well-being of tribes, many anthropologists and other thinkers have also sometimes perpetuated a "saviour complex," portraying tribes as bereft of the agency to express their own aspirations, and seeing it necessary to salvage tribal people from the clutches of their insubstantial living conditions without a deep consideration of how their ways of life have thrived in the past.

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The anthropologist Verrier Elwin. At least initially, he supported protectionist policies and recommended the "partial isolation" of tribes from non-tribal society. COURTESY ASHOK ELWIN

The word "tribe" itself, in fact, has always been a contentious term. Due to the lack of an adequate term, indigenous people chose to adopt it to identify their place in the world. The narrative is changing today. I cannot speak to contemporary writings from central and peninsular India, but in a sharp contrast to how intellectuals have ignored tribes' cosmology and other beliefs, contemporary authors such as Arkotong

Longkumer, in his book *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India*, and John Thomas, in *Evangelising the Nation: Religion and the Formation of Naga Political Identity*, have written about the Nagas at length and recognised tribal indigenous religions and the creation stories of the Zeliangrong Naga. In *Anthropological Perspectives on Indian Tribes*, another insightful book published last year, the anthropologist Subhadra Mitra Channa writes that people categorised as tribes are not merely remnants of a static past. She reminds us that tribal religions and customary laws are as relevant as organised religions and institutionalised laws in modern society, and refers to the morungs of the Nagas, the dhumkuria of the Santals and the gotuls of the Gonds as equivalents to schooling systems in mainstream societies. She also suggests that tribes are separate from Hindu society (except for tribes such as the Bhotiya, Rajputs living along the Indo-Tibetan border). Channa argues that implicit to theories such as Sankritisation is an evolutionary approach towards tribes, implying that there is a ladder towards attaining higher status under the fold of caste Hindus. This erases the history of “domination, and of hierarchies within politics,” between tribes and others.

Tribes are people with a functional social order, culture, customs, cosmology and metaphysics. They must be treated as any other contemporary people. I attempt to question the representation of tribes so far, and also try to foreground the intrusive ways in which assimilation was foisted upon tribes. The writer Ruby Hembrom, who is the founder of Adivaani—a publisher of Adivasi writing—told me that engaging with the writing of anthropologists writing about tribes is “a call to tribal conscience to address these [writers] head-on, without fear, as a way of setting records straight and challenging the primitivism they’ve thrown at us as exotic uncultivated people. This is finally exercising our agency to assert our true identities; a way to liberate the image and reputation of our ancestors and ourselves that has been chained to dehumanization by these writings’ imposed impressions of us.”

WRITING ON TRIBES IN INDIA became a priority for the British colonial regime as it expanded into forests, hills, mountains and islands, and turned to anthropology to mine intelligence and data on the tribes. Inventories were manufactured to assist administrators to pre-emptively plan their rule and consolidate their expansion by gathering material for ethnographic classification (although, for some administrators, ethnographic work could also have been a hobby). The establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, in 1784, for instance, cultivated studies of people groups. Several other studies did the same, such as HH Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* in 1891, K Rangachari and Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* in 1909 and an eight-volume study titled *The People of India*, which was compiled in the late nineteenth century and contained annotated photographs of Indian castes and tribes.

Many ethnographic studies are replete with language that exoticises or degrades tribes, such as “naked,” “savage,” “primitive,” “uncivilised,” “barbaric,” “wild” and “criminal”—terminology that is telling of a lack of understanding, empathy or respect towards tribes and their ways of life. These labels often remain unaddressed in academia and public discourse. Alternatively, they have been justified by apologists or casually overlooked as incidental to the tribal narrative, but this branding continues to define the approach of mainstream societies towards tribal people.

The historian Saagar Tewari writes that “the tone and tenor of the discourse on tribal populations was not set by Verrier Elwin and G.S. Ghurye, as has often been claimed, but found its first articulations in the works of frontier administrators, such as J.H. Hutton. These administrators, in turn, were influenced by the prevailing trends in British Anthropology which had begun to emerge around the time of the First World War.” One such text I encountered, the 1835 *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, describes the Nagas, the Kuki and other

tribes as people inclined towards base instincts, who do not possess the capacity to engage with art.

Such a state of society, it must be evident, is wholly incompatible with any mental improvement, or any advance in the arts; they pursue the same unvarying course of employment ... and after their crops are reaped, either resign themselves to the unrestrained indulgence of feasting and dancing, or in planning expeditions against the villages of some less powerful tribe.

In “Reconfiguring Colonial Ethnography: The British Gaze Over India’s North-East,” Jelle JP Wouters, a senior lecturer from Royal Thimphu College, writes about the early phase during which administrators, explorers, travellers and missionaries doubled up as colonial ethnographers. This continued until what he calls “the consolidating phase,” towards the beginning of the twentieth century, following which academic anthropological investigations and the writing of monographs on tribal communities began in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. The Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf was, according to Wouters, the “first ‘real’ anthropologist in the region,” when he came to the Naga Hills around 1936. He subsequently spent over forty years studying northeast India in the twentieth century, and wrote a book called *The Naked Nagas* (among others), the title of which itself is suggestive of an objectifying view of tribal people.

The Naga scholar Tezenlo Thong has explored colonial representations of Nagas at length, particularly after the British invasion of 1832 and the arrival of missionaries. “The constant colonial drumming of the Nagas as ‘barbaric savages and blood-thirsty headhunters’ undermined the collective psyche of the colonized Nagas,” he writes, alluding to the practice of decapitation in the context of warfare. (In *The Naked Nagas*, Fürer-Haimendorf wrote that upon seeing decapitated heads, he “began coveting those heads, I wanted to take them home as museum

specimens.”) Thong also refers specifically to the terminology Furer-Haimendorf deploys, including the focus on the term “head-hunter.”

Some Western writers, such as von Furer-Haimendorf, have noted this cultural practice of offering food and drink to the skulls of the deceased, but they either chose to ignore it and focus on “headhunting” or were blinded by their preconception of their colonized exotic subjects. There is no denying that Konyaks like other Nagas took the heads of their enemies during war, but the cultural practice of preserving the skulls of family members played a crucial role in the accumulation of skulls among the Konyaks.

Furer-Haimendorf also made sexist and racist comments about tribal women, in statements that simultaneously exoticise and trivialise their existence. In an interview with the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane in 1983, for instance, he said:

Chenchus are rather, one would say, rather unattractive and very dark skinned and have nothing of all the beautiful clothes for instance which the Nagas have. So it was a disappointment for my wife, she had always seen the lovely photographs of the Nagas and this was the first time that she accompanied me on fieldwork and there were these very poor Chenchus who live under windscreens or little huts and had really very not much which was visibly attractive.

The mixture of pity and revulsion here is quite inconsistent with the fact that his career was built on anthropological work on tribes. In the same interview, he speaks of accompanying a district officer on “a kind of punitive expedition” that “was really an expedition into the unadministered tribal areas which lay between the administered Naga hills district and the frontier of Burma, where head-hunting was going

on.” He also casually passes over the fact that two Naga villages had been burnt, saying, “Of course that sounds worse than it is, because these houses are built of bamboo and thatch and they can be very easily rebuilt, it was not like burning a village with solid houses.”

In his introduction to *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, a 1959 anthology he edited, Elwin writes, “In contrast to both an earlier and later age, the European travellers of the nineteenth century were under no illusions about the Noble Savage; in the main their opinion of the tribes was a low one and their attitude was all too often patronizing or scornful.” He catalogues critically, and at length, statements by previous travellers, administrators and soldiers, about tribes’ “general degeneracy,” dirtiness, hideousness, savageness, propensity to thieving and treachery. He quotes, for instance, a Scottish officer in the British army that Christianity be introduced to the Nagas:

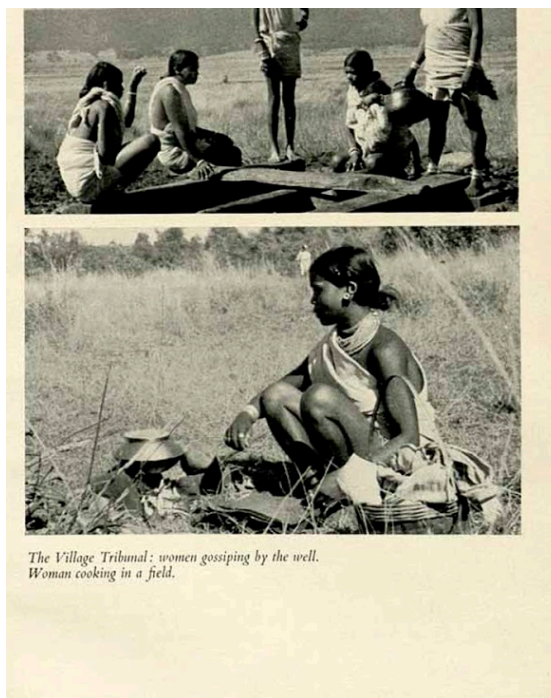
I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilization; that with it they would want to make a religion, and that we might as well give them our own, and make them in this way a source of strength, by thus mutually attaching them to us.

Elwin does lament the ignorance of such statements, but he also tempers such excerpts with caveats, such as: “We must remember that it was not easy, at that date, for the majority of European officers to take seriously any religion other than their own.” He also celebrates a more apparently “modern” kind of writing for not using derogatory or derisive language when writing about tribes, singling out Dalton for instance, for not “speak[ing] of the tribal people with contempt or scorn,” and instead patronisingly recording their attributes, such as the Miri women being “faithful and obedient wives and cheerfully bear the hard burden imposed on them.” In Elwin’s own much-celebrated work *The Baiga*, he tries to impose a liberal framework onto the lives of the women:

In Baiga society the women enjoyed an excellent position. Theoretically, in so patriarchal and priestly a tribe man should be in the ascendant: actually women have great freedom and no little authority. She may go about on her own alone; she generally chooses her own husband, and changes him at will, she may dance in public; she may take her wares to a bazaar and open her own shop there, she may own property and she may drink and smoke in her husband's presence.

Tribal society is, of course, not free from patriarchy. Yet Elwin's emphasis on individual liberty over a thorough examination of tribal women's agency, political and cultural participation and everyday struggle for an equal stake in their communities is myopic. The Australian scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's thoughts on how approaches to women's positions in indigenous and mainstream societies cannot be conflated may find some resonance here. "Unlike feminist standpoint theory Indigenous women's standpoint theory is not predicated on the separation of ourselves from our countries, human ancestors, creator beings and all living things," she writes.

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A page from Verrier Elwin's *The Baiga*. Elwin's emphasis in the book on individual liberty over a thorough examination of tribal women's agency, political and cultural participation and everyday struggle for an equal stake in their communities appears myopic.

There is no dearth of colonial writings that portray tribal communities as unthinking people, without history or social order. However, as Wouters told me, talking about tribal India in the singular, as a monolith, is itself inaccurate. For one thing, tribal communities in the so-called Sixth Schedule areas differ vastly from those in the mainland. "Scholarship needs to be sensitive to those differences, which make generalizations about tribal India a tricky affair," he said. "Regarding the popular view that colonial officers looked down on tribes I have some hesitation, in the sense that they often did not look down on tribes more than they looked down on other populations." He added, too, that the colonial archive on tribal communities is incredibly vast, and that, particularly when it comes to tribes in the highlands of northeast India, they make for very useful resources. "If one wishes to argue that tribes have been described in a depreciating—if not insulting—manner, one can find plenty of examples to substantiate this point," he said. "However, the opposite is equally true and many colonial writings also praise upland tribal

communities for their democratic constitution, social cohesion, and the richness of their cultural and material lives, often finding in them aspects which their own countries had already lost, and which they lamented.”

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Welsh missionaries, pictured with Khasi porters in the late 1800s, in the foothills near Shella, on the border between the Khasi Hills and Sylhet. During the colonial expansion, administrators, explorers, travellers and missionaries sometimes doubled up as ethnographers documenting tribes. COURTESY TARUN BHARTIYA/NIAMBOOK

TEZENLO THONG WRITES in his book *Progress and Its Impact on the Nagas: A Clash of Worldviews* that the introduction of print increased the erasure of much of the history and culture of the Nagas, and altered public perception towards Naga history and oral tradition, even within the community itself. “This misconception means that beyond the printed texts the Nagas do not possess any history,” he writes. “Naga’s understanding of history is being shaped, informed and altered by the notion of unidirectional and progressive history that constitute all history text books in schools.” Tribal communities were and are romanticised and viewed as primitive, as a group of people who need to adopt progressive values and become agents of change by leaving behind their own identity in the realms of culture, social, politics, custom and

religion. This view had important repercussions when it came to the idea of political expediency for tribal people as well.

The colonial administration began the “scheduling” for largely tribal areas in the provinces of British India. “Scheduling was the act of committing certain areas to a written list or inventory of ‘special administrative regimes’; here, normal laws and regulations prevalent in the rest of British India would not be applicable,” Saagar Tewari writes. “The colonial administrators vouchsafed it as a viable method for ensuring ‘protection’ to ‘primitive’ tribal communities from the degenerating effects of ‘culture contact’ with ‘civilized’ areas. ... The underlying belief behind this categorization was that modern representative democracy with electoral politics and law courts was highly unsuited to tribal communities.”

Tewari adds that several assumptions aired later, during constitutional debates over the issue of central and provincial representation for tribes, “had their roots in the nascent discipline of anthropology which vitally shaped this discourse in the run-up to Indian independence.” One of these assumptions was that tribal people were not equipped to govern themselves politically, while another was “the widely prevalent perception that the tribes themselves were not ‘vocal’ and had to be spoken for in order to make their interests visible in the constitutional deliberations.”

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The Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf pictured here sitting with Naga people, drinking from a bamboo chungu. He is considered to be among the first "real" anthropologists to have come to the region. Although he spent much of his career studying tribes, his comments about tribal women, in an interview late in his career, simultaneously exoticised and trivialised their existence. THE ESTATE OF CHRISTOF VON FÜRER-HAIMENDORF / SOAS / UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Till the mid twentieth century there were, broadly, two approaches to the question of how to conduct elections that would imply sending representatives to assemblies and councils and thereby giving all Indians franchise. Tewari writes that whereas the nationalist view wanted to bring the largely tribal areas into elected legislative bodies, this was "bitterly opposed by the 'official block' sympathetic to the aboriginal communities. ... the scholar-administrator viewed the tribal problem as an administrative one while the nationalists saw it as a legislative problem. The dialectical clash of these two camps generated an intense discourse which had far-reaching ramifications for the future of tribal communities inhabiting the Indian subcontinent." There were stances on tribal representation from figures on various ends on this prism, including those of JH Hutton, who advocated protectionism; AV Thakkar, a Gandhian nationalist and the one-time head of of the Harijan

Sevak Sangh, who advocated for bringing tribes into the Hindu fold; and BR Ambedkar, who was in the block ostensibly sympathetic to the tribal communities.

Ambedkar's monumental and pioneering work for India's Dalits and marginalised communities in making affirmative action a reality in postcolonial India is well known. Upon entering academia, I found his writing was taught as much as a critical work of social science as it was as a political text. But his undelivered speech and text, *Annihilation of Caste*, contains certain troubling statements on tribes. In contrast to his phenomenal call in it to uproot the caste system in India, his understanding and concern for tribal people appear ill-informed and paternalistic:

... aborigines have remained in their primitive uncivilized State in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old. Not only are they not civilized but some of them follow pursuits which have led to their being classified as criminals. Thirteen millions of people living in the midst of civilization are still in a savage state and are leading the life of hereditary criminals !! But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it. This is a phenomenon which in my view is quite unparalleled. What is the cause of this shameful state of affairs? Why has no attempt been made to civilize these aborigines and to lead them to take to a more honourable way of making a living? The Hindus will probably seek to account for this savage state of the aborigines by attributing to them congenital stupidity. They will probably not admit that the aborigines have remained savages because they had made no effort to civilize them, to give them medical aid, to reform them, to make them good citizens. But supposing a Hindu wished to do what the Christian missionary is doing for these aborigines, could he have done it? I submit not. Civilizing the aborigines means adopting them as your

own, living in their midst, and cultivating fellow-feeling—in short, loving them.

Annihilation of Caste is Ambedkar's most powerful and audacious attack on caste-riddled Hindu society. When addressing Hindu society at large on the question of tribal communities, Ambedkar attacks Hinduism for its inherent disunity, implying that the religion could never extend itself to those outside of its purview. He attacks Hindu society for not acknowledging the tribes, with the lines, "Thirteen million people living in the midst of civilisation are still living in a savage state ... But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it." But, within this rhetorical attack, his language to describe tribes is disparaging and offensive and echoes liberalist colonial language. "The Hindu has not realized that these aborigines are a source of potential danger," he writes. "If these savages remain savages, they may not do any harm to the Hindus. But if they are reclaimed by non-Hindus and converted to their faiths, they will swell the ranks of the enemies of the Hindus. If this happens, the Hindu will have to thank himself and his Caste System."

In 1928, Ambedkar spoke before the Indian Statutory Commission, led by John Simon, which was seeking opinions and recommendations on the kind of electoral representation that would be incorporated into India's constitutional reforms. When he was asked whether he would "then extend adult suffrage to the aboriginal tribes and to the criminal and hill tribes," he said "yes." In a May 1945 address, on the topic of guaranteed representation for several communities in central and provincial law, Ambedkar explained the omission of seats for tribal people in the proposal for representation in legislature (when other communities were given their share):

It will be obvious that my proposals do not cover the Aboriginal Tribes, although they are larger in numbers than the Sikhs, Anglo Indians, Indian Christians and Parsees. I may state the reasons why

I have omitted them from my scheme. The Aboriginal Tribes have not as yet developed any political sense to make the best use of their political opportunities and they may easily become mere instruments in the hands of either a majority or a minority, and thereby disturb the balance without doing any good to themselves. In the present state of their development it seems to me that the proper thing to do for these backward communities is to establish a Statutory Commission to administer what are now called the 'Excluded Areas' on the same basis as was done in the case of South African Constitution. Every province in which these 'Excluded Areas' are situated should be compelled to make an annual contribution of a prescribed amount for the administration of these areas.

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A page from Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's *The Naked Nagas*, the title of which is itself suggestive of an objectifying view of tribal people.

On the question of tribes and political expediency, Ambedkar clarified, in a letter published in *The Times of India*, that the logic was similar to the

protectionist approach: “far from excluding the cause of Aboriginal Tribes, I had made what, according to my belief, I thought was a far better and a far effective proposal for their protection. ... The reason why I did not include the Aboriginal Tribes in the scheme of distribution of seats in the Legislature is not the result of my antipathy to them, but is entirely due to my belief that these Aboriginal Tribes do not as yet possess the political capacity which is necessary to exercise political power for one’s own good.” Ambedkar’s role is laudable in speaking for the rights of tribes.

Yet, this language is paternalistic and infantilises tribes as being without the ability to think and decide for themselves, as people in dire need of protection, direction, shepherding and whose time of self-determination has not come. He was later instrumental, though not acting alone, in arguing for the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, and he continues to be held in high regard by tribes for making this a reality. Tribal figures, including the Khasi leader Rev JJM Nichols Roy, had partaken in the discussion for its drafting, and had supported Ambedkar’s stance. (By contrast, Vallabhbhai Patel, who was the chairman of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas, was earlier reluctant about the idea of providing protections for tribes.) In a 1949 Constituent Assembly debate, Ambedkar said the drafting committee was acting upon the guidance and advice of “two principal representatives, who must be credited with sufficient knowledge and information about this matter, namely, the Premier of Assam and his colleague, Rev. Nichols-Roy.” Though far from perfect, the Sixth Schedule provides a scope for tribes to administer their affairs and practice customary laws in consonance with their village institutions; it also protects their custom, culture, lands, and identity in their contact with communities who are not tribes.

The emphasis, by many debating the issue of political representation for tribals, on the need of education for tribal people may have stemmed from a limited knowledge of tribes’ own organic systems of knowledge

production and dissemination. In fact, not only do tribes place an emphasis on wisdom and instruction for life and survival, but institutionalised learning, in the form of dormitory systems, akin to modern-day formal schooling—like the morungs for Naga tribes—also existed. The lack of recognition for tribal institutions, and the inference that the lack of formal education makes tribal people incapable of taking decisions and asserting political aspirations, may have come from a lack of knowledge of these specifics, but was nonetheless disparaging and disrespectful. The protectionist approach shows how the tribal world has been consistently spoken about with Hindu society as a reference point. The lack of understanding of the intricacies of tribal religions and customs is also evident in Ambedkar’s “Civilisation or Felony,” in which he writes that they involve “worship of demons of all denominations and dead ancestors of all antiquity. Witchcraft, sorcery, animal and human sacrifice make up their religion.”

Ambedkar did see similarities between the “Untouchables” and tribal people, counting them, in the same essay, among India’s “Sunken Peoples.” However, he appears to also draw a distinction based on their participation in mainstream society, writing that, “Like the Criminal Tribes, the Untouchables also live in the midst of civilized Hindu society and possess a degree of culture and morality which completely separates them from the Primitive tribes,” and thereby demonstrating ignorance of the intricacies of tribes. The tribal world has been consistently spoken about with Hindu society as a reference point, thereby distorting tribes’ history, culture, custom, tradition and religion.

The administrator JH Hutton, who was also the All-India Census Commissioner for 1931, had argued for the absolute segregation of tribal areas. He felt that tribal religion was distinct from Hinduism and held that there should be territorial demarcation and protection of tribal areas from external elements. His reasoning stemmed from his convictions that the contact of tribes with outsiders is often marked by exploitation, control and subjugation, but his motivations are not entirely clear.

Tewari, for instance, says his stance “raises an important question for scholars i.e. why is Hutton making an argument for representation of aboriginals based on the category of tribal religion? Possibly, this question is bound by the term ‘Communal Award’ whereby the colonial state recognized and earmarked a minority group for representation based on separate electorates only, and that too only if they could be clearly delineated as a ‘religious’ one.”

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Fürer-Haimendorf's image of a Konyak Naga boy with a "head-hunter's" face tattoo. In *The Naked Nagas*, Fürer-Haimendorf wrote that upon seeing decapitated heads, he "began coveting those heads, I wanted to take them home as museum specimens." CHRISTOPH VON FÜRER-HAIMENDORF / WELLCOME COLLECTION

Interventions intending to impose religion onto tribes have attempted to assimilate them into mainstream society by diluting their uniqueness. For tribes, the links between culture and religion are integral to shaping their ways of life. Elwin was another figure who warned that the conversion projects of Christianity would have negative effects, and initially, he was cautious about Hinduism's influence on tribal communities too, and advocated, early on, against the stripping away of tribal ways of life and customs, involving drinking, songs, sex, dancing

and religious rituals. However, quite significantly, he later had a change of heart, and expressed the view that tribes, especially of central India, are a part of Hinduism. According to the scholar Archana Prasad, an anti-missionary campaign, led by Elwin, argued in 1944 for assimilating tribal people into the Hindu social system as Kshatriyas:

Missionaries should be withdrawn from the Partially Excluded areas; we insist that all education in these areas should be taken over by the Government. We demand that the Government should do twice as much as the missionaries have achieved. We have no interest in keeping these people backward. If they are to take their place as Kshatriyas in the Hindu social system then they must be trained in the arts of liberal thinking and educated to courage and traditions of honor ...

The sociologist André Béteille made it even more complex by portraying the boundary between tribes and their neighbouring Hindu communities as fluid in nature. He dismissed the inherent power relations between them and went on to claim that tribal people were once the dominant force over the neighbouring societies, defining tribes in a way that alluded to an exchange of influences. He advocated for tribes to replicate the caste structure to make themselves dominant over others, arguing that an answer for the emancipation of tribes lies in Hinduism.

What is characteristic of the relationship between tribe and civilization in India is that there was virtually no way in which a tribal dynasty could legitimize its rule without becoming Hinduized. This meant, among other things, bringing in Brahmin priests, Barbers, Washermen and the rest, and replicating in due course of time the hierarchical structure of caste.

It is well-known that tribal communities in the northeast exist outside of Hindu society, even if there is a fluidity in the boundary between tribes and Hindu society in other parts of India. But Beteille writes that the Ahom and Khasi have links with Hindu society, inferring this on the basis that their features are similar.

Then there are the tribes in the northeastern hill areas—Konyak, Abor, Dana and many others—who, because of their location on the frontier of more than one civilization, were better able to withstand the pressure to become castes, although the Ahom, now regarded as a caste, were once clearly a tribe, and the Khasi, still regarded as a tribe, were developing a state with unmistakably Hindu features.

The power dynamic between tribes and outsider communities should not be perceived as stemming from natural, inevitable forces. Jelle JP Wouters told me that “there is a tendency to differentiate between castes and tribes based on their social organisation, with the former being hierarchically constituted and the latter following egalitarian traditions. There are plenty of problems with this view, including with the idea that tribal social organization is egalitarian in the first place.” He concluded that it may be more productive “to compare and contrast tribes and castes based on their cosmologies and ontologies, and explore how differences in these realms may create different ways of ‘being’ in this world.”

Indigenous people are gradually finding a space in being assertive in writings that safeguard their knowledge systems and the epistemology of their life-worlds. For instance, Tezenlo Thong’s writing has attempted to elucidate how Naga society had different approaches to education and the notion time itself: “For traditional Nagas, history is not about dates and numbers or chronological records. It is about religious practices, experiences and events in the context of the community,” he writes. “The

traditional Naga cultural construction of time or their human experience of time in their specific geographical location differs greatly from the linear concept of time in Western thought.”

Several indigenous authors—Easterine Kire, Jacinta Kerketta, Dolly Kikon, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Temsula Ao, Joy Pachuau, Senganglu Thaimai, Gladson Dungdung, Veio Pou, Kham Khan Suan Hausing, Ngamjahao Kipgen, Hoineilhing Sitlhou and many more—are writing stories foregrounding their perspectives, concepts, and theories about tribes. This is a step towards undoing tribes’ invisibility in literature. Yet, discrimination against tribes continues. Hembrom spoke about how the exploitation of tribes in academia and literature have caged them in language that is derogatory, offensive and condescending. There is a need to reclaim descriptions of the tribes; the onus must reside with the tribes themselves, since they have endured these portrayals for far too long. “This is us announcing that we will not allow the dominion of texts of the past to continue to oppress, subjugate and inform our present,” she told me. “New texts will arise from the tribes; narratives of our survival through millennia, ancestral songs of identity and resistance, the richness of our lifeways; of ploughing through collective memory for this collective resurgence against the (inherited and internal) colonialism of the present. Its time has come. Our time has come.”

RICHARD KAMEI (/AUTHOR/963) is a doctoral candidate at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.

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