



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

# IJDR

International Journal of Development Research  
Vol. 14, Issue, 12, pp. 67270-67280, December, 2024  
<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.29048.12.2024>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

## RETHINKING TRIBES IN INDIATHROUGH CONTEXT OF TRIBE-CASTE CONTINUUM: NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY AND EXPLORATION OF HYPERVISIBILITY AMONG SIDDI TRIBE

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2024  
Received in revised form  
29<sup>th</sup> October, 2024  
Accepted 04<sup>th</sup> November, 2024  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2024

#### Key Words:

Archival Records, Autonomy, Caste, Content Analysis, Exceptionalism, Hypervisibility, Identity, Particularism, Representation, Tribe, Tribal Studies.

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### ABSTRACT

The study of tribes in India remains a complex and often paradoxical field, primarily when tribes are observed as distinct ethnographic units. A central question in tribal discourse is whether Adivasi studies can be treated as a distinct discipline and how it relates to other primary academic fields such as history, economics, and political science. A significant challenge in tribal studies seems to be that tribes are invisible in modern state archives, making it difficult to construct a coherent historical narrative for them, as opposed to other subaltern groups like Dalits. This omission perpetuates a narrow understanding of Adivasis, which frequently reduces them to ethnographic subjects while disregarding their contributions to broader historical, economic, and cultural debates. This paper critically examines the socio-political identity of Indian tribes, with a particular emphasis on the Siddi community, to investigate their historical, cultural, and contemporary status. The research explores the construction of "tribe" as a colonial and postcolonial category, focusing on its role in marginalizing tribes by romanticizing them as the "primitive other." This portrayal has reinforced their exclusion from contemporary socio-political structures. The paper also examines the persistence of exceptionalism in postcolonial discourse, which obscures the complex historical connections between tribal communities and other groups in India. The paper uses content analysis as its primary methodology to investigate both historical records and contemporary narratives, offering a critical rethinking of tribal identity and autonomy. This research tries to challenge the dominant discourse by integrating tribes' historical and contemporary experiences based on the proposition of hypervisibility, particularly those of the Siddi community, and focuses on contributing to a more encompassing understanding of tribal identity, representation, and integration in contemporary India.

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Citation: Sagnik Chakraborty, 2024. "Rethinking tribes in indiathrough context of tribe-caste Continuum: Negotiation of identity and exploration of Hypervisibility among Siddi Tribe". International Journal of Development Research, 14, (12), 67270-67280.

## INTRODUCTION

Tribes as an independent domain of study has been always a paradox, even if we consider tribes as distinct ethnographic identity. The biggest question arising out of the tribal discourse is that can Adivasi study have a separate discipline and what will be its relation to other primary disciplines like history, economics, political science, etc. The biggest challenge in doing Adivasi studies is due to their absence or invisibility from modern state archives. This creates a dilemma in claiming their (tribal) history unlike other subaltern subjects like that of Dalits. It is always important to understand the relational subjectivity of the Adivasi to other subjects of determining factors, i.e. who they are in the sense of their subjectivity. We have always seen Adivasis as purely ethnographic subjects with very limited possibility of them appearing in history, economics, literature or even as religious subjects of their own rights. This paper critically examines the socio-political identity of tribes in India, focusing on their historical, cultural, and contemporary contexts.

It interrogates the paradox of tribal studies as an independent discipline, exploring the relational subjectivity of Adivasis and their invisibility in modern state archives. Unlike other subaltern groups such as Dalits, tribes remain largely absent from historical, economic, and political discourses, often reduced to ethnographic subjects. The paper traces the construction of the "tribe" as a colonial and post-colonial category, emphasizing its romanticized depiction as a "primitive other" distinct from mainstream populations. This conceptualization reinforced their marginalization, portraying tribes as politically excluded and economically backward entities outside the structures of modernity. Even as terms such as "Adivasi" and "Indigenous people" have replaced "tribe," the notion of "exceptionalism" persists, obscuring the diverse historical linkages and interactions of tribal communities with other societal groups. Drawing from historical and contemporary scholarship, the study rethinks tribal identity through two key lenses: "Tribal Particularism and Exceptionalism" during the colonial period and "Tribe-Caste Discourse" in post-colonial India. Additionally, it examines the current status of tribes in contemporary India, with a

specific focus on the Siddi community, which grapples with an acute "identity crisis." Their hypervisibility as an exoticized group coexists with systemic marginalization, reinforcing their exclusion from mainstream socio-political processes. By connecting the historical experiences of tribes with their present-day realities, this paper challenges the myth of Adivasis as an exceptional category, reframing them as dynamic subjects deeply intertwined with the fabric of Indian history and society. Through archival analysis and critical examination of tribal experiences, the paper contributes to understanding the complexities of tribal identity, representation, and autonomy in contemporary India.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper's primary research methodology is content analysis, which allows for a systematic examination of textual materials to identify patterns, themes, and discourses about the identity, representation, and autonomy of tribal communities in India. Content analysis is ideal for this study since it allows for the extraction of nuanced insights from a wide range of historical and contemporary sources, such as state archives, academic literature, government reports, and media coverage. The goal is to critically engage with how the Siddi tribe, as an example of India's tribal population, has been represented in these documents over time, and to identify the key realities that emerge from these representations. This paper's primary focus is on identifying the realities of tribal identity, particularly as it exists along the caste-tribe continuum. The study investigates how tribes, particularly the Siddi community, have navigated the complex intersections created by socio-cultural hierarchies and their own distinct ethnic and cultural identities. By examining these dynamics, the paper seeks to understand how caste and tribe categories are fluid, shifting along a continuum rather than remaining rigid, and how this fluidity influences tribal experiences in contemporary India. The paper also addresses the debate over representation versus autonomy in the context of tribal identity. This is investigated through the lens of the caste-tribe discourse, projecting the morphology onto the framework of colonial-postcolonial processes of exceptionalism-particularism binary, where the question of whether tribes should be integrated into mainstream society (representation) or maintain autonomous control over their cultural and political systems (autonomy) remains contentious. This tension is evident in how the Siddi tribe has been both marginalized and commodified, with representations that obscure their autonomy and limit their agency in defining their identity. Three key cases from archival sources encompassing the Siddi tribe are examined to highlight this tension. These case studies offer a historical perspective on the Siddi community's representation, with a focus on post-colonial India and how their identity has been shaped by forces such as post-independence governance, agents in various social institutions, and contemporary media portrayals. Through these cases, the study examines the emergence of tribal "exceptionalism" and its impact on the Siddi community's sociopolitical position. Finally, the paper delves into the long-shaped debate between particularism and exceptionalism in Indian tribal discourse. Colonial narratives frequently portrayed tribes as exceptional, labeling them as "primitive" or "untouched" by modernity, a characterization that continues to influence postcolonial understandings of tribal identity. By analyzing archival materials, the paper investigates how historical constructions of "exceptionalism" have persisted into the present and how they impact the current struggle of Siddi tribe for recognition and self-determination. Overall, this paper's methodology tries to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Siddi tribe's complicated socio-political identity in modern India by combining text analysis, archival research, and a critical engagement with caste-tribe discussions. The study seeks to add to the larger conversation on tribal representation, autonomy, and identity in India by concentrating on these important arguments and instances.

### Adivasis: The identity

According to Uday Chandra (2015), historically, the people residing in the hills and forests of India, who later became the tribes, were

neither stateless peoples, random subjects outside history, nor simple and non-hierarchical egalitarian communities. Instead, they were involved in complex kinship relations, land and forest politics, and interrelationships with other groups based on tributary systems. They also specialized in trade and warfare and had complex cultures. These communities were internally hierarchized and gendered, challenging simplistic depictions of tribal societies as egalitarian. Sumit Guha's (2013) recent works identify that tracing Indian history through pre-colonial periods as a concept of societal evolution arising from complex interactions among diverse jatis—such as caste or tribe—is inappropriate. These categories were primarily characterized by Iberian and British ideas regarding blood, birth, and backwardness, concepts local to early modern and modern Europe. Guha emphasizes that these categories in operational procedures were not confined to castes and tribes but were composed of a complex range of jatis, quams, and kabilahs. These categories created lineage, religious denominations, political status, and occupational groupings. With the advent of colonial modernity, these diverse groups were arranged into three categories of colonial difference: religion, caste, and tribe. This framework, according to the colonizers, created an organizational structure for future processes of social stratification. Tribes were framed as people residing in hills, forests, and frontiers—socio-economically separated from the "civilized" society—while society itself was considered to consist of evolved complexes of religion, such as Hinduism and Islam, and intricate differences of caste and class (Guha, 2013).

The idea of 'exceptionalism' endorsed the notion that tribes, as a distinct and helpless segment of the Indian population, required state's protection through special legislations. Over time, dissenting interest groups both contested and endorsed this idea, which was put forth by the British colonial state. Such legislations were reiterated in the constitutional provisions of post-Independence India. Debates on Adivasi subjectivity have been resurrected today in the context of the state's developmental agenda. While state policies are outlined on specific assumptions and understandings of such communities, the state also actively seeks to popularize and push its own characterization of various groups and their relationships with others (Chandra, 2015). Today, we have a wide range of terminologies and definitions—each carrying its own cultural baggage—that have determined the nature of state intervention in tribal life. Regardless of its intentions to formulate new policies for equitable development, the post-colonial Indian state has remained trapped within a conceptual-ideological-political predicament. It replicated much of the colonial rhetoric and representations of such communities (Guha, 2013; Chandra, 2015). Tribes, compared to the caste-class binary, were regarded as non-monetized, egalitarian communities. They were often considered "nonexistent" in labor and credit markets. This categorization was meant to produce the tribe as an isolated, pre-political entity, serving as the necessary "other" to the concept of the "modern." Consequently, tribes can be considered a modern production of historical synthesis—a group that may have rebelled repeatedly (Chandra, 2015). This leads to the question of the subjectivity of tribes: whether tribes are a unique subjective orientation or merely a modern subject alongside the Dalit minority, middle class, and women. The recently constructed and highly problematic nature of the tribal category does not render it unreal or immaterial. If groups of people have been conditioned and governed as "tribes" for the last 200 years of colonial history, and if they have been mobilized and politicized into a unique identity called "tribe," then it is indeed a valid and historically significant category (Guha, 2013; Chandra, 2015). The discourse surrounding tribal identity in India has been a subject of significant academic inquiry, especially in the context of historical and contemporary processes that shape their social and political realities. This review focuses on the foundational literature and sources that inform an understanding of how tribes in India have been conceptualized and the challenges they face in the modern era.

### Colonial Representation: Within and Beyond Imperialism

In contemporary discourse, there is a rich scholarly debate on the colonial construction of a 'tribe' in India. Some scholars contend that

the identification of sections of the conquered populations as a 'tribe' and caste formed part of the colonial state's 'legitimizing ideology' (Chandra, 2015), while others underscore the role of indigenous agency, stating that, along with European notions of race, the colonial discourse on the tribe in India had also been informed by prevailing concepts and values among dominant caste groups within India (Guha, 2013). The former group of scholars considers such categorizations as a 'conscious colonial project' of creating a racial ethnography that was appropriated and internalized by Indian elites, both to justify an Indian hierarchy and to assert parity with the European high societies (Chandra, 2015). Notwithstanding, historical evidence emphasizes that British colonial attitudes towards the 'tribes' were neither monolithic nor fixed and tended to vary significantly across regions and over time (Guha, 2013). In the mid-nineteenth century, the English East India Company's government exhibited only marginal interest in the 'tribal' world, which figured in official perceptions as the backdrop for counter-insurgency measures. The political disruptions caused by the gradual intrusion of the Company into these interior regions drew British attention to the 'tribal question,' which was seen primarily as a law-and-order problem. In numerous regions, particularly on Bengal's western frontier, indigenous rulers sought British assistance in quelling their recalcitrant subjects. Aiming to establish a system of loose control over the district with the help of local collaborators, the British sought to implement a system of 'indirect rule' through subjugated local feudatory chiefs, who were recognized as lawful rulers, with the indigenous population as their subjects. At this initial point of contact, the British understanding of the latter was largely influenced by prevailing notions among the local Hinduized ruling groups, which pivoted around the concept of 'difference' (Chandra, 2015).

These ideas of difference also formed an essential component of the Enlightenment project in Europe and were readily accepted by British bureaucrats and military officers. As Metcalf (1994) points out, to be 'enlightened,' the 'other' had to be shown as 'savage' or 'vicious.' For instance, the Ramgarh Magistrate characterized the Hos of Singhbhum as a 'dreadful pest' and 'the lowest kind of Hindus,' with manners and customs that were 'little separated from savages. In this process, the tribal people were distinguished from the mainstream Hindu and Muslim populations by what was depicted as their characteristic wildness. These attributes, in British eyes, linked them to other 'primitive' individuals, especially in Africa, with whom they were perceived to share similar characteristics (Guha, 2013). Over time, as tribal uprisings continued, British perceptions evolved. Enquiries into the origins of these rebellions convinced the government of the distinctiveness of these regions and the vulnerability of the 'tribal' people to powerful adversaries against whom they needed protection. Thus, the British assumed the role of 'liberators' of 'tribals' from the oppression and exploitation of indigenous rulers—now portrayed as the natural enemies of the 'tribal' people—as well as from non-'tribal' outsiders, the dikus, such as moneylenders, traders, and landlords. By and large, the 'tribal' people were portrayed as having been 'stateless' and entirely independent of any form of control by the indigenous political system. Consequently, direct rule was implemented in some of anomalous 'tribal' zones of administrative exceptionalism in and around Bengal. These zones were recognized as non-regulation areas, where ordinary regulations did not apply. The administration of these districts was placed under an officer, the political agent to the governor general, and the ruler-subject relations hinged upon paternalism and personal rule (Chandra, 2015).

The new government policy, which persisted even after the Company's rule was replaced by the Raj, came to be characterized by isolationism, protectionism, and improvement. According to Chandra (2015), the imperial project of primitivism—a 'type of liberal imperial ideology of rule that justified the subjugation of populations and places described as wild, savage or, simply, primitive'—formed the fundamental principle of an 'imperial ideology of rule.' For proponents of primitivism, protection implied not only the defense of the economic rights of the tribal peasant but also the preservation of 'imagined... aboriginal ways of life in a modern age.' The primitive,

'savage' subjects were seen as childlike and incapable of pursuing their self-interest. In this scheme, colonial knowledge classified the subject's primitiveness, culture, tradition, governance, and reform. Thus, the colonized subject became not only the subject of colonial authority but also of colonial knowledge (Chandra, 2015). W.W. Hunter and E.T. Dalton sought validation in their reconstructions of tribal history, describing tribes as the aboriginal autochthones of India. Using Sanskrit texts, they portrayed the racial difference between the 'nobler' Aryan races and the 'aborigines,' who had been reduced to slavery. Dalton contrasted the superiority of Aryan culture against the primitiveness of the pre-Aryan 'Asuras,' whom he identified as the ancestors of the 'Kolarian tribes,' i.e., the Munda, Santal, and Bhumij. He suggested the existence of early Sanskritic categorizations distinguishing between aborigines who had made certain advances in civilization and deserved respect and those despised as brutish savages (Hunter, 1868; Dalton, 1872). The Dravidian ancestry of the aboriginal Indian population was first outlined by missionary Robert Caldwell, who claimed that the Dravidian people predated the Aryan invasion of India. Bishop Hislop spoke of dichotomous waves of pre-Aryan migrations into India from both the northeast and northwest (Caldwell, 1856). The issue of racial particularism gained scientific legitimation after Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which tied human evolution to notions of race. This altered perception is evident in H.H. Risley's ethnographic surveys, where he applied contemporary European anthropological methods, such as anthropometric measurements, to classify the 'races' of Bengal. Tribes were increasingly seen as a distinct and inferior race, a conclusion 'proven' scientifically (Risley, 1908). Gradually, the rigid compartmentalization of identities occurred with the introduction of the Census, aiming to 'know,' 'classify,' and 'count' the Indian population. The Census operations validated official classifications of 'tribes' and 'castes,' hardening the boundaries between social categories on a country-wide scale. The Census of 1872 included categories like 'Aboriginal Tribes' and 'Semi-Hinduized Aborigines,' distinguishing between communities unaffected by Hindu influence and 'pure' groups. With the Census data, the British government arrogated the right to determine and define the 'true' aboriginal classes (Guha, 2013). By the early 20th century, after three Census operations, the colonial government offered an official definition of 'tribe.' According to H.H. Risley (1908), a tribe in India was "a collection of families or groups bearing a common name, generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor... usually speaking the same language, and occupying a definite tract of country." This definition was formulated when the general map of India's racial composition had already been outlined. The Census of 1881 theorized that India's population evolved from two hostile races—Aryan and non-Aryan—lacking cohesive nationality (Risley, 1908).

**Question of Hinduism:** The priority given to religious identities by the Census in identifying social categories resulted in the creation of "an idea of religious community more detailed and exact than any existing prior to the creation of the census." Between the 1920s and the 1940s, there were complex and contentious debates concerning Hinduization and the involvement of different communities in Indian politics. The political setting of this ideological turmoil was shaped by the Communal Award of 1932 and the steady evolution of the Two-Nation theory advanced by the Muslim League. While the Census officers at the end of the 19th century raised the question of who qualifies as a Hindu, no definitive answer emerged. In his report on the Census of 1881, the Census Commissioner of Bengal, J.A. Bourdillon, stated:

*"No answer in fact exists, for the term in its modern acceptance denotes neither a creed nor a race, neither a church nor a people, but is a general expression devoid of precision, and embracing alike the most punctilious disciple of pure Vedanta, the Agnostic youth who is the product of Western education, and the semi-barbarous hillman ... who is as ignorant of the Hindu theology as the stone which he worships in times of danger or sickness"* (Bourdillon, 1881).

This inclusion of the "semi-barbarous hillman" within the category of Hindu was later reinforced by nationalists and Hindu zealots who aimed to broaden the foundation of Hindu identity by incorporating groups previously excluded. In his pamphlet *Hindutva* (1923), Savarkar discussed the original unity underlying the cultural diversity of Hindus. Despite divisions into numerous castes and sects, he argued that Hindus were irretrievably tied together by "invisible bonds of blood." For Savarkar, all clans and caste groups clamouring for special status and recognition of their identities—"Santals, Kols, Bhils, Panchamas, Namasudras"—were Hindus (Savarkar, 1923). From the late 1930s, the debate on the status of such "clans" intensified with the political assertion of "ancestral" communities and the emergence of independent "ancestral" organizations, particularly in Chotanagpur in western Bengal. In 1938, the term Adivasi, which means "original inhabitant," was first used here. Over the following years, the notion of the Adivasi as a collective identity for people with a long history of oppression and displacement, yet intrinsically connected to India's national history, acquired distinct contours. This development is evident in the speech of Jaipal Singh, the leader of the Jharkhand movement, in the Constituent Assembly in December 1946:

*"As a jungli, as an Adivasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march on that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated, it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated and neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers—most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned—it is the newcomers who have driven my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastness. The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India, punctuated by rebellions and disorder" (Singh, 1946).*

The speech by Jaipal Singh reflects a deep socio-cultural consciousness rooted in spatial and historical dynamics, portraying Adivasis as original inhabitants of India with a distinct identity forged through millennia of dispossession and resilience. Singh's invocation of the Indus Valley civilization situates Adivasis as foundational to India's history, contrasting this with their displacement to jungles by "newcomers." This narrative underscores a dichotomy between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, framing Adivasis as victims of systemic marginalization since ancient times. Spatially, Singh's reference to "jungle fastness" highlights the forced relegation of Adivasis to peripheral geographies, far from their ancestral lands. Culturally, his speech constructs a unified Adivasi identity, rooted in shared experiences of exploitation and rebellion. By emphasizing continuity from the pre-Aryan past to the present, Singh connects their plight to broader national struggles for recognition and justice. This reconstruction of history also erases internal diversity among Adivasis, presenting them as a monolithic entity. Such rhetoric, while politically strategic, simplifies the heterogeneity of tribal communities. Singh's articulation of Adivasi exceptionalism thus intertwines their spatial dislocation and historical victimization, framing their identity as both ancient and essential to India's socio-political fabric.

Here, we encounter a reconstructed "history" legitimizing political ends, alongside an expanded understanding of Adivasis as a people tracing their ancestry to the pre-Aryan period of Indian history. This definition also claims an experience of victimization and displacement spanning 6,000 years, transforming ancient civilizers into jungle dwellers. The idea that Adivasis of India were descendants of the non-Aryan autochthones became widely accepted in Indian intellectual and political circles by the mid-20th century due to colonial writings on the subject from the mid-19th century onward. For instance, S.C. Roy, widely regarded as a principal Indian ethnographer, represented "natives" as the "descendants of the untouchable dasas and dasyus, the nishadas and barbaras of ancient Hindu India" (Roy, 1912). Similarly, anthropologist

Biraja Sankar Guha identified tribals as the proto-Australoid people of India, whose ancestry he traced to the Indus civilization (e.g., Harappa). Notably, Jaipal Singh refrains from mentioning English colonizers as part of the chain of oppressors; instead, he perpetuates and builds upon the colonial trope of the non-tribal outsider as the primary adversary of Adivasis. This rhetoric underscores their perceived distance from mainstream society and reinforces Adivasi exceptionalism. Above all, the Adivasi identity here is rendered homogenous, erasing all heterogeneities in the process of self-definition.

### Assimilation, Isolation and Integration

During the 1940s, amidst the backdrop of Constituent Assembly deliberations, the discourse on the identity and status of aborigines expanded beyond the political arena to include Christian missionary circles. While earlier assumptions, such as the racial distinction between aborigines/Adivasis/'clans' and the rest of the Indian population, were upheld, the impending independence of India shifted the conversation towards issues of assimilation and integration. The concept of assimilation found strong advocates among nationalist writers, ranging from proponents of Hindu consolidation to Gandhians. Sociologist G.S. Ghurye critiqued the distinction between caste and 'clan,' categorizing 'tribals,' whom he referred to as 'Backward Hindus,' as part of mainstream Hindu culture. Ghurye emphasized the necessity of their total assimilation into Hindu society (Ghurye, 1932). Similarly, A.V. Thakkar, a Gandhian social reformer credited with coining the term *Adivasi*, passionately argued for the integration of aborigines into the "civilized communities" of the country. For Thakkar, isolation would undermine national solidarity, and he advocated for equal privileges and responsibilities for Adivasis (Thakkar, 1935). Contrasting these assimilationist perspectives was Verrier Elwin, who critiqued both colonial rule and Hindu landlords for uprooting tribals from their indigenous systems of production and forcibly placing them within the peasant economy. Elwin observed that the conditions of tribals were especially dire in Hindu-majority areas. He proposed a developmental approach centered on protective measures, which came to be known as the "national park" approach. This framework emphasized preserving tribal autonomy and cultural distinctiveness while safeguarding them from external exploitation (Elwin, 1943).

Jawaharlal Nehru sought a medium ground and further developed the triadic paradigm of assimilation, isolation, and integration. The necessity to modernise tribal communities without destroying their distinctive cultural identities was acknowledged by Nehru's inclusion strategy. He supported measures that allowed Adivasis to be gradually incorporated into the national fabric while maintaining their autonomy, opposing the imposition of mainstream ideals on them (Nehru, 1952). For tribals of India, the triad model—integration, isolation, and assimilation—constructed a distinctive historiography. Their intricate spatial biographies, moulded by marginalization, resistance, and displacement, were reflected in it. Tribal histories were reimagined not only as narratives of victimization but also as testimonies to resilience and agency. These spatial biographies emphasized the connections between geography, identity, and historical experience, going beyond the parameters of spatial imperialism. This historiography recognized the diversity of tribal peoples' lived realities and contested homogenizing narratives by placing them in larger national and global contexts.

### Tribe-Caste Dialect: Discourse on Democracy

The questioning of identity has long been a central issue, particularly in relation to the unique subjectivity of tribes. This inquiry spurred a significant discourse on the distinction between caste and tribe. The colonial paradigm of aboriginality, which emerged from various experiences such as the conquest and settlement of the Americas and the antipodes, was tied to the annihilation, dispossession, and containment of indigenous peoples (Sahlins, 1993; Stanner, 1969). Tribes referred to the indigenes or autochthones, positioned as counterpoints to invaders and foreigners in modern discourse. The

global racial frame of reference was employed to differentiate between the "modern" and the "non-modern" (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the context of India, this differentiation was grounded in a graded hierarchy, as the society consisted of multiple layers of ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and territorial communities (Gupta, 1991). In Indian society, the dichotomous entities of master-slave or white-colored did not fit, given the pluralistic nature of its graded hierarchical system (Dumont, 1980). However, colonialism imposed a binary division—tribe and caste—that created a distinction between the indigene and the modern (Gupta, 2002). This process led to long-term political consequences (Jaffrelot, 2003). It was argued that tribes were segmentary, while caste was organic; tribes were isolated and self-sufficient, whereas caste was interactive and interdependent; tribes were animist and caste was Hindu; tribes were egalitarian, while caste was hierarchical. Such distinctions were drawn to preserve the binary opposition between tribes and castes (Elwin, 1947; Ghurye, 1959). However, in reality, very few social groups fully conformed to this binary. It is more accurate to view caste and tribe not as oppositional categories, but as a "continuum" in which tribes gradually evolve or assimilate into castes through a process of transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). This transition also entails intermediate stages where traits of both tribes and castes coexist, with one often dominating over the other. Tribes were often placed in the evolutionary hierarchy. Though the debate ended in a stalemate, the unresolved relationship between caste and tribe left significant political implications (Béteille, 1998).

In contemporary social politics, the terms "Dalits" and "Adivasis" (tribals) are often used interchangeably. India's constitution positions Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as analogous, at least from the perspective of the nation-state (Kumar, 1998). Everyday political language, particularly in movements like the Bahujan Samaj Party, pairs Dalits and Adivasis as analogous groups, reflecting their shared history of oppression and inequality (Yadav, 2000). In academia, too, centers of study on tribals and castes have become interdisciplinary or analogous. The central premise of this analogy is that both groups represent minorities marked by subalternity (Harriss-White, 2003). The analogous relationship between caste and tribe, based on forms of absolute subalternity, appears to validate the argument that the caste-tribe boundary is fluid. The distinction between caste and tribe was, in this view, a colonial construct designed to organize Indian society in terms borrowed from European frameworks (Dirks, 2001). This dynamic boundary can be seen in movements like the Gujjar's demand for inclusion in the ST category, which reveals the porosity or opacity of the caste-tribe boundary (Kohli, 2004). However, despite this analogy, the differentiation between Dalits and Adivasis remains critical in the Indian political context. Dalits and Adivasis have evolved as distinct political subjects within the national socio-political scenario (Omvedt, 1994). Although the Dalit movement has been relatively silent, it has impacted the central position of administration, bringing the Dalit question to the heart of Indian democracy. In contrast, tribal movements, though still active, have receded from the political epicentre. Their demands are often framed in a manner similar to those of the Dalits (Béteille, 1998). Contemporary studies on Adivasis are now tasked with distinguishing Adivasi struggles from the broader Dalit discourse on power (Singh, 2012).

When viewed through the lens of absolute subalternity, caste and tribe often appear to share a common fate of marginalization. However, the division between the two, reinforced through colonialism, has led to distinct categories with separate spheres of power and politics. The difference between Dalits and Adivasis not only draws on their distinct histories of caste-tribal politics but also reflects the differing nature of their conceptions of democracy (Srinivas, 1996). For Dalits, the primary concern has been "representation" in the democratic system. In contrast, Adivasis' understanding of democracy revolves around "autonomy" (Ambedkar, 1945). The processes of political articulation for Dalits and Adivasis are thus fundamentally different (Ambedkar, 1949). Dalit literature and language movements emphasize self-representation, arguing that only Dalits can

authentically speak about their lives, culture, and identity (Ambedkar, 1945). For this reason, the domains of language, literature, and authorship must be democratized. Ambedkar's faceoff with Gandhi over separate electorates, rather than simply reserved seats, highlights the emphasis on representation in the Dalit struggle (Ambedkar, 1949). Ambedkar's vision of federal democracy emphasized that Dalit representation should be defined as that of a "social minority," distinct from religious or cultural minorities. He argued that the status of Dalits should be akin to that of other minorities, such as Muslims and Sikhs, but without the need for cultural distinction (Ambedkar, 1949). In contrast, Adivasis in India were often seen as a distinct cultural community, a characterization that prevented them from achieving the status of a "social minority" as defined by Ambedkar. Tribal communities' distinct cultural identity hindered their recognition as socially marginalized, as Ambedkar conceptualized it (Ghurye, 1963). Consequently, tribes were somewhat misfit within Ambedkar's framework of representative democracy. This distinction between the political struggles of Dalits and Adivasis underscores the complex and evolving relationship between caste and tribe in contemporary Indian society.

According to Ambedkar (1945), the aboriginals had not yet developed a sense of power politics and, by claiming self-representation, they could disturb the dichotomous balance between the majority and the minority, without necessarily gaining any benefits. Tribal demands for autonomy in India have varied across regions. For example, in the North-East, the demand for autonomy manifested in forms of secessionism, while in Jharkhand, the demand for separate statehood was a response to the deprivation of tribal resources (Sahni, 2006). The distinction between Dalits and Adivasis arises in their political demands: Dalits primarily ask for representation, whereas Adivasis seek total autonomy over resources, which often creates conflicts between the state and tribal authorities (Yadav, 2000). Ambedkar argued that tribes lacked the necessary numbers within the broader Indian population to constitute a political constituency capable of achieving autonomy. As a minority group with a "primitive" nature, they could disrupt the stable relationship between majority and minority constituencies (Ambedkar, 1945). From a democratic perspective, Adivasis were yet to evolve into an adequate political subject. According to Ambedkar, the inability of tribes to become political subjects was also linked to Hinduism and the graded hierarchical nature of Indian society. Ambedkar contended that Hinduism was caste-ridden, and Hindus failed to assimilate tribes into the social fold, viewing them as outcastes and polluting agents. Consequently, tribes remained in a state of ignorance and savagery, with their lives often ascribed to criminality (Ambedkar, 1949). He did not envision Dalits and Adivasis as similar political subjects, particularly in his conception of federal democracy. While tribal communities, particularly in regions like Nagaland and Jharkhand, claimed autonomy and the right to control their resources, some historians have argued that these demands were consequences of the exclusion of tribes from both the general and legal frameworks, as shaped by colonial strategies (Gupta, 2002). Others view these movements as a counter-nationalist reaction against mainstream Indian nationalism and the colonizing activities of the government, especially in resource-rich areas like Central and North-East India (Chatterjee, 1993). While it may be overly simplistic to reduce these demands to mere counter-nationalism, it is also important to recognize the broader implications for the imagining of democracy in India (Singh, 2012). The relationship between democracy and autonomy becomes clearer when we consider the administration's stance on tribal autonomy. In the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, the constituent assembly proposed reserving seats for tribals in Parliament, similar to the provisions for Dalits. Although there was some resistance, most members supported this proposition. This arrangement gave tribals representation, but the question of autonomy was sidelined. There were concerns in Assam and Bengal that such reservations might lead to the infusion of tribals into the Dalit political realm, potentially disrupting local political forces. The general consensus among administrative forces was that tribes were politically less developed than Dalits. In a 15-year political time frame, the Dalits were expected to be on par with upper

castes, whereas tribes were perceived to need a much longer period to establish a political presence in modern democracy (Kohli, 2004). Therefore, the central issue was not reservation, but the reluctance to grant territorial and resource autonomy to tribes, thereby treating them as a distinct identity akin to Dalits in terms of their subaltern status. In contrast, leaders including P. R. Thakur argued that tribes were indeed a distinct "political minority" from other social and cultural minorities Dalits and Muslims. He emphasized that tribal communities practiced forms of self-government that were far more democratic than the hierarchical practices that characterized the rest of Indian society (Thakur, 1981). Jaspal Singh (1998) further contended that self-governance among tribals could serve as a model for India's so-called "civilized" societies, which were deeply entrenched in hierarchy and stratification. He also opposed the view that lower-caste Hindus could be considered the indigenous people of India, and critiqued the prefix "Adi" attached to Dalit identities. According to Singh, tribes were the true original inhabitants of the land, and they had the right to claim India in its entirety, except for a few areas earmarked for autonomy. He argued that to resolve the representation-autonomy debate, the immediate solution lay in redistributing provinces based on existing self-governing units rather than religious divisions (Singh, 1998).

Opponents of tribal autonomy contended that in a state like India, where a homogeneous local governance system is practiced, territorial-based self-governance for tribes could result in divergent political paths, which might eventually lead to the assimilation of frontier tribes into non-Indian political regimes, such as those of Burma or Tibet (Gupta, 2002). The status of the Tribal Advisory Committee also remains contentious. This committee, composed of three-fourths of the state legislature assembly from the tribal community, was tasked with advising the state government on the administration and welfare of tribal zones. The issue was whether the government was bound to follow the committee's advice, and whether the process was transparent. Tribals viewed the process as non-transparent, and some even argued that the Constituent Assembly did not adequately represent the diverse tribal communities, and therefore, they were not obliged to follow the Indian Constitution (Sahni, 2006). The introduction of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996, nearly half a century later, marked a significant milestone. After prolonged debate in Parliament and the public sphere, it formally acknowledged tribal communities' rights to self-governance to some extent. Though this development was a step toward addressing the autonomy issue, it remains a contentious and evolving debate.

The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act envisions the Gram Sabha as the primary decision-making body at the grassroots level, particularly in matters of land acquisition, mining, control of money, ownership of forest produce, and land alienation (Bhatia, 2009). The Gram Sabha is a collective of adult individuals from the local community, meant to hold discussions on various administrative topics. While it can be argued whether this process constitutes direct democracy, it has, to some extent, led to autonomous governance in tribal areas by providing tribal communities with deliberative agencies that can function without interference from government administrative departments (Kumar, 2012). However, the implementation of this framework has often diverged from its intended outcomes. In many regions, particularly in states like Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, villages function more as administrative units than as communitarian bodies (Ghosh, 2015). This undermines the potential for face-to-face local assemblies, raising concerns about the erosion of tribal autonomy (Sen, 2018). In such states, communities have called for amendments to laws and administrative decisions that would allow them to maintain their autonomy while aligning with constitutional frameworks. However, the precedence of state laws over communitarian decisions has been a recurring issue. This highlights the broader tension between the vision of "democracy with autonomy" and the democratic model of governance that is based on lateral and vertical structures (Yadav, 2000). The Indian model of decentralization is heavily reliant on a representative framework, wherein the nation is divided into

constituencies. This system operates through a central administrative unit and a robust electoral infrastructure that aims to integrate diverse ideologies and populations, all while maintaining territorial representation. However, Adivasis have struggled to fully participate in this model, as neither their numbers nor the liberal concept of minority status works in their favor (Sharma, 2004). Thus, the primary solution to the crisis of identity for tribals lies in the provision of administrative autonomy, which would allow them to self-govern and assert their cultural and political distinctiveness (Singh, 2006). It is crucial to recognize that tribal movements for autonomy have consistently emphasized their cultural distinctiveness and political visibility. However, this "hypervisibility" is often disproportionate to their numbers and has been amplified by the long history of Adivasi insurgency, both against colonial rule and economic exploitation by landlords (Chatterjee, 1993). This visibility reflects a deep political efficacy that translates into claims for territorial rights, self-governance, and control over resources, with minimal interference from a central, imperial structure (Gupta, 2002). Adivasis do not seek complete isolation but demand autonomy within a broader framework that allows for territorial rights and self-governance while avoiding excessive integration into the national polity.

The demand for autonomy, in this sense, can be understood as a form of counter-nationalism, wherein Adivasis seek greater self-determination, potentially including separate statehood, rather than merely functioning within the tight national territorial framework that the Indian state advocates (Singh, 1998). This vision of Adivasi autonomy challenges both the Indian democratic structure and the colonial-era governance model, which failed to accommodate the diverse political aspirations of tribal communities (Bhatia, 2009). The question of whether Adivasis could coexist within the Indian state as culturally distinct, yet politically autonomous, entities remains a contentious issue. The cultural autonomy that they demand can be seen as a reductionist approach to autonomy, which the state has been reluctant to endorse in its existing form (Kohli, 2004).

### **Hypervisibility of Tribes amidst the Tribe-Caste Continuum**

The "tribe-caste continuum" debate provides a critical lens through which to examine the shifting boundaries of identity, autonomy, and representation in contemporary India. Tribes have frequently been "hypervisible" in political discourse, but this visibility does not always equate to power or agency. Historically, colonial and postcolonial representations portrayed tribes as marginalized, primitive, and culturally distinct, reinforcing and complicating their identities within the larger social and political landscape (Gupta, 2002). In contrast to Dalits, whose political identity has evolved primarily through struggles for representation within caste hierarchies, Adivasis have sought both representation and autonomy, which includes control over land, resources, and self-government (Yadav, 2000). The hypervisibility of tribes along this continuum frequently blurs the line between autonomy and representation. While Dalits have established themselves as a distinct political constituency, Adivasis continue to negotiate their identity within a framework that perceives them as both marginalized and hypervisible in nationalist discourse. The paradox of their visibility is that they are frequently viewed as a barrier to a unified national identity, despite the fact that their distinctiveness is recognized in legal and political frameworks (Chatterjee, 1993). This duality has resulted in an ongoing conflict between claims for autonomy based on territorial and cultural rights and the reality of their integration into a state-centered, representative democracy. The paradox of hypervisibility arises because, while tribes are frequently viewed as key symbols of India's marginalized communities, their prominence has not always resulted in tangible empowerment. Instead, it has reinforced their status as the "other" in national consciousness, frequently overshadowing their distinct claims to autonomy. This visibility is disproportionate to their numbers, as a long history of tribal insurgency against colonial rule and economic exploitation by landlords has brought their issues to the forefront (Chatterjee, 1993). The question of identity formation in this context revolves around how Adivasis perceive themselves within the



larger national framework. On one hand, their hypervisibility in political discourse establishes them as a distinct cultural entity; on the other hand, their struggle for autonomy reveals a deep desire to maintain political and cultural sovereignty, free of the impositions of both the state and larger, hegemonic social structures (Singh, 1998). This dynamic emphasizes the importance of a nuanced understanding of the tribe-caste continuum, in which tribal identity is not simply a byproduct of caste-based marginalization, but a distinct and evolving political subjectivity that requires both representation and autonomy. The tribe-caste continuum further exacerbates the problem by placing tribes in a state of 'fluxed identity'. This continuum has blurred the distinction between tribal and caste identities, forcing tribal communities to balance their distinct cultural heritage with the hegemonic structures of caste-based politics (Singh, 2006). In this context, tribal identity is frequently viewed as fluid, with some communities being integrated into the caste hierarchy through assimilation or political negotiation. For example, demands for reservation and inclusion in the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe categories have resulted in a rethinking of what it means to be "tribal" in modern India. As tribes shift between these categories, their historical and cultural realities become increasingly fragmented, making it difficult for them to maintain a coherent political and social identity (Gupta, 2002). This flux in tribal identity causes disintegration in the process of recognizing their own sociopolitical realities in the current situation. Tribes are caught in a web of competing identities and demands—on the one hand, they seek to assert their cultural autonomy and historical distinctiveness; on the other hand, they are increasingly forced to navigate the state's bureaucratic categorization of them as "tribal" or "caste" members. This leads to a loss of self-definition, as tribal communities are subsumed within a system that frequently treats them as subalterns, with no clear path to asserting their sovereignty.

For example, the debate over tribal autonomy has become increasingly entangled with caste-based affirmative action issues, where the tribal demand for self-governance and control over resources is frequently confused with the Dalit community's broader demands for representation in political and social institutions. This overlap, while offering the opportunity for solidarity, also fragments tribal identity as tribes attempt to reconcile their goals with those of other marginalized groups (Chatterjee, 1993). The disintegration of this processual realization of tribal identity, demonstrate the difficulties tribes face in asserting their autonomy in the face of a state that continues to classify them as caste or tribe, without fully acknowledging their unique historical and cultural experiences. Thus, shifting boundaries within the tribe-caste continuum are not only a political struggle, but also a deeply existential one for tribes whose identities are in a state of flux. Demands for autonomy and representation are central to these struggles, but the state's categorization of tribes and castes makes it difficult for them to articulate their political needs. As a result of the intersecting burdens of colonial legacies, state governance, and competing demands of social justice movements, tribes' identity formation process continues to disintegrate. This context urges us to segregate the contextuality of tribe from that of dynamics of caste-tribe continuum and analyse the duality of rootedness and the image of rootedness' related to tribal notion of 'identity performance' and their relativity to the political structure in a time frame where unarticulated processes of assimilation is creating a superficial layer over the aspects of integration of spatial biographies, determining their lived experiences first as a 'political tool' later as that of a 'social unit' beholding an age old cultural-aesthetics to its identity.

### Siddi Tribe: A Forgotten Identity

The Siddi tribes stand as one of the most remarkable examples of human migration and cultural integration. Originating from East Africa, particularly from the regions of present-day Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, the Siddis were brought to the Indian subcontinent during medieval times, primarily to serve as royal bodyguards, soldiers, and servants (Bashir, 1996). These communities, due to their Negroid racial traits, were highly valued for their exotic appearance

and physical strength, qualities that made them preferred members of the royal courts and elite households in the Indian subcontinent (Rao, 1993). Over time, the Siddi community became settled in the southwestern parts of India, particularly in Karnataka and Gujarat. The Siddis' migration and subsequent settlement led them to assimilate into the larger socio-cultural fabric of India. With many of the later generations adopting Islam and Christianity as their primary religions, they also adopted local languages, such as Malayalam and Gujarati, while gradually abandoning their native African languages and cultural practices (Bashir, 1996). However, despite this assimilation, elements of their African heritage persist, particularly in their folk dances, such as the *Dhamal*, which is a cultural amalgamation of both Swahili and Sufi influences. This dance remains one of the most prominent markers of their African ancestry (Rao, 1993). Today, the Siddi community is estimated to number approximately 50,000 individuals, but their socio-economic conditions remain dire. A small number of Siddis own land and engage in agricultural activities, while the majority live in urban and rural areas, often working as laborers in oil mills, factories, or as drivers and mechanics due to their limited access to technical education and skill development (Rao, 1993). The lack of educational opportunities and employment avenues has resulted in the Siddi community being marginalized within both their local and national contexts.

Despite being legal citizens of India, the Siddis face significant challenges regarding their identity and belonging. This marginalization manifests not only in economic exclusion but also in social and cultural disjuncture. The Siddis are caught in a liminal space where their African heritage is increasingly forgotten, and their Indian identity is often denied or overlooked by the broader society. The Indian government, while not actively interfering in their internal affairs, has similarly failed to address the socio-political concerns of the Siddis, further entrenching their marginalization (Rao, 1993). The contemporary situation of the Siddis is marked by a constant struggle with their identity formation, which is deeply affected by their spatial reality and racial biography in contemporary India. On one hand, the Siddis attempt to assert their rootedness in Indian society, often by adopting local languages, religions, and customs. On the other hand, they face the disjuncture of being perceived as neither completely African nor totally Indian, a predicament that severely hinders their ability to form a coherent sense of identity owing to the transgression of racial determinism in the dimension of lived and conceived spaces. This tension between their African past and their Indian present, coupled with their socio-economic marginalization, places the Siddis in a unique position where they are compelled to navigate a complex matrix of cultural heritage, racial identity, and national belonging (Hall, 1990). The disjuncture experienced by the Siddi community highlights the fragility of their cultural heritage and identity in the face of globalization and state neglect. The lack of institutional support, combined with the invisibility of their struggles within the broader political discourse, exacerbates the erosion of their distinct cultural practices. The question of rootedness in both their African and Indian identities remains unresolved, as the Siddis continue to face the challenge of reconstructing their identity in a society that frequently overlooks or misinterprets them as 'bahari' or 'intruders'.

**Case 1, Identity Erosion and Process of Spatial Dislocation:** In the village of Ankolvadi, situated in the core of Gir Forest, the Siddi community endures harsh living conditions. Basic necessities like a consistent water supply, reliable electricity (absent in half the village), proper road connectivity, and access to quality education remain elusive. According to AsidSiddi, a laborer from the village, the absence of technical education perpetuates this deprivation. He emphasizes that merely teaching Gujarati and Hindi fails to equip the younger generation with the skills necessary for socio-economic advancement. Asid asserts that "computers are a must-have in every school," yet schools in Siddi-dominated areas continue to lack access to this essential resource, despite repeated petitions to the government (Archives of Quint, 2018). While governments often initiate large-scale projects in Siddi regions aimed at creating employment, these initiatives frequently overlook fundamental needs such as clean drinking water, paved roads, and consistent electricity. This oversight,

Asid notes, highlights the paradoxical nature of contemporary governance in India. Despite residing near Gir Forest—a prominent tourist destination—Siddi families derive only modest incomes by working as tour guides or gypsy drivers. However, they face significant challenges as the government prioritizes its own trained guides, who are better educated and possess technical skills, further marginalizing local guides like those from the Siddi community (Archives of Quint, 2018). Another layer of exploitation is evident in how the Siddi cultural heritage, particularly their *Dhamal* dance form, is commodified for tourism. Asid reveals that although this dance form attracts tourists, the performers receive minimal compensation due to the intervention of middlemen. When asked whether tourists pay them directly, Asid remarked with dismay that contractors control financial transactions, leaving little for the performers' families (Archives of Quint, 2018). Beyond economic exploitation, the cultural misrepresentation of the Siddi community exacerbates their struggles. Tourists often perceive them as foreigners due to their African ancestry, a stereotype deeply hurtful to the community. Asid laments that this mischaracterization stems not only from societal biases but also from governmental neglect, which fails to empower the Siddi community with adequate representation. This lack of autonomy undermines the opportunity to present their Indo-African cultural identity on a global stage. "We are as much a part of India as anyone else," Asid asserts, criticizing the socio-political structures that have contributed to this systemic erasure (Archives of Quint, 2018).

The Siddi community resides near Gir Forest, which is geopolitically and economically significant due to its popularity as a tourist destination and wildlife sanctuary. However, their relationship with this space is one of exclusion rather than inclusion. While the Siddis live in the forest and surrounding areas, the government and tourism industries regard these areas as economic and cultural commodities, placing external stakeholders ahead of the indigenous population. This results in a form of spatial dislocation in which the Siddis are physically present but socially and economically excluded from the decision-making processes that shape their environment, resulting in the exploitation of indigenous resources. For instance, the government's reliance on trained guides equipped with technical skills inequitably disadvantages Siddi guides who do not have access to equivalent training opportunities. This exclusion not only denies them equitable access to economic benefits, but it also demonstrates their perceived inadequacy in the space they have traditionally occupied. Their identity as custodians of the land is thus overshadowed by narratives created by external actors with greater economic and political influence. Cultural misrepresentation exacerbates the 'breakdown of identity'. The commercial exploitation of the Siddi *Dhamal* dance for tourism reduces their rich heritage to a transactional experience for visitors. Furthermore, both tourists and local authorities portray the Siddis as a community of "African origin," creating a schism between their self-perception as Indian citizens and the external perception of them as foreigners. This labeling deprives the Siddis of their inherent connection to the Indian cultural and spatial fabric, reinforcing a sense of "otherness" that separates them from the larger societal narrative.

The neglect of basic infrastructure, such as water supply, electricity, and education, exacerbates the Siddi community's disconnection from their spatial dynamics. While they live in a region with significant economic potential, their failure to address these basic needs places them on the periphery of spatial development. This neglect creates a stark contrast between the space's projected image as a thriving tourist destination and the reality of the Siddis' deplorable conditions. Asid Siddi points out, a lack of technical education and resources, such as computers in schools, perpetuates marginalization. It not only denies the community access to opportunities, but it also demonstrates a failure to recognize their potential to make a meaningful contribution to the region's socioeconomic fabric. This lack of relativeness to spatial dynamics reduces their sense of belonging and discredits their identity as active participants in the region's development.

### **Case 2, Identity Disjuncture: The Flawed Constructs of Patriotism and Nationalism:**

Among the Siddi community, certain groups have been designated as nomads and granted special rights under central government initiatives aimed at recognizing this historically overlooked tribe. A key aspect of these initiatives includes programs focused on sports and physical development to identify athletic talent within the community. The inspiration behind this effort stems from India's lack of Olympic medals in sprinting—an event predominantly dominated by African nations. Authorities sought to capitalize on the Siddis' perceived natural athleticism, rooted in their African ancestry, to bolster India's chances in this domain (Archives of Quint, 2018). One of the athletes selected under this initiative, Jeju Siddi, shared his experiences representing the Siddi community on a national platform. Jeju recounted how he was met with astonishment and skepticism, as many struggled to recognize him as Indian. He noted that "nobody related him to India but instead associated him with Africa," a misperception that fostered feelings of isolation. This lack of belonging was further exacerbated by discriminatory remarks from coaches, who addressed him with derogatory terms like "chimpanzee," "gorilla," "kaalu," and "saand." Such behavior reveals the persistence of racial bias and systemic oppression, even within institutions designed to uplift marginalized communities (Archives of Quint, 2018). Jeju also described instances of racism beyond institutional settings, particularly when traveling outside his birthplace. He recounted being harassed on public transport, where individuals treated him as a foreigner, with one person even grabbing his collar and admonishing him to "behave like a tourist." These experiences reflect the exceptionalism imposed upon the Siddi community, positioning them as perpetual outsiders within their own country. This denial of their shared national identity starkly contrasts with Jeju's pride in representing India and his unwavering loyalty to his homeland. He emphasized, "People from our community are known for their loyalty, and we are loyal to our national identity, but our fellow citizens refuse to accept that we share the same ethnic roots as them" (Archives of Quint, 2018). The disconnect between the Siddis and urban spaces compounds their sense of alienation. Jeju remarked that while cities feel foreign and unwelcoming, the forests provide a sense of belonging, free from the constant questioning of their identity. For him, India remains a land of dreams, and he aspires for a future where someone from his community wins an Olympic gold medal, stands on the podium, and sings the national anthem without their identity or ethnicity being doubted. "This dream is not just about a medal; it's about achieving recognition and dignity on an equal footing," Jeju stated (Archives of Quint, 2018).

The Siddi community's experiences, particularly through the lens of Jeju Siddi's narrative, illustrate a stark identity disjuncture that impugns India's patriotism and nationalism constructs. Identity disjuncture occurs when individuals or communities perceive themselves differently than they are perceived or treated by society as a whole. This incongruity, according to the Siddis, stems from systemic biases, racial stereotypes, and a failure to recognize their integral role in the national framework. In terms of patriotism, Jeju's unwavering loyalty to India is juxtaposed against the hostility he receives from his fellow citizens. Despite being a proud representative of India on national platforms, he is still perceived as an outsider, with his African ancestry overshadowing his Indian identity. This misrecognition signifies a flawed patriotism that is exclusionary and conditional, predicated on superficial markers such as race and ethnicity rather than shared values or contributions to the nation. Jeju's complaint that his community is treated as foreign within their own country serves to highlight this dissonance, as patriotism in India frequently fails to embrace the diversity it professes to celebrate. Nationalism, as experienced by the Siddis, also reveals its contradictions. The dominant narrative of nationalism in India glorifies a homogenized identity that adheres to specific cultural, racial, or linguistic norms of central kinship zones. Communities that deviate from this constructed ideal are pushed to the margins, their contributions ignored, and their identities questioned. Despite being an important component of India's cultural



mosaic, the Siddis experience racial discrimination and societal alienation, reflecting an exclusionary nationalism. Jeju's coaches, for example, use terms like "chimpanzee" and "kaalu," demonstrating how systemic racism undermines the very unity that nationalism claims to promote. This flawed nationalism is also mirrored in the token recognition of the Siddi community. Programs designed to uplift marginalized groups, such as athletic training initiatives for the Siddis, are frequently framed as acts of inclusivity. However, these efforts remain superficial when they fail to address the underlying societal prejudices that alienate such communities. Jeju's experience of being stared at, doubted, and harassed while representing India demonstrates how formal recognition does not translate into practical acceptance. Furthermore, the Siddis' identity as a "community of African origin" is further fractured within the nation-state due to the exceptionalism imposed on them. When Jeju travels outside of his hometown and is treated as a foreigner, it showcases the fragility of the nationalist narrative. Instead of integrating diverse communities under a common identity, nationalism has become a tool for privileged groups while alienating others. This exclusionary framework betrays the ideals of equality and solidarity that should be central to a nation's identity.

### *Case 3, Sense of Pride and Collective Identity*

Kamla Babu Siddi, a former athlete who represented India at the Sixth South Asian Games in Dhaka in 1993, vividly recalls her journey as a 15-year-old participant in athletic camps during the late 1980s. Now a mother of two, Kamla reflects on her contributions to the nation with both pride and pain. She states, "I have possibly done more for the country as compared to an average Indian, however have not had the option to get even half the privileges an Indian gets" (Archives of Quint, 2018). Despite being forgotten by the Indian sports fraternity, Kamla continues to identify herself as an Indian and takes immense pride in her achievements. Her story exemplifies resilience and loyalty to a nation that has often overlooked her and her community's contributions. When asked why she has not sold her medals and jersey from the 1993 South Asian Games—a question laced with undertones of her community's economic struggles—Kamla firmly responded, "This is all I have. They (medals) belong to me as well as to the entire nation. I would rather die than sell them off" (Archives of Quint, 2018). Kamla's poignant words and unwavering sense of pride in her accomplishments highlight the systemic neglect faced by the Siddi community. Her experiences illustrate India's broader failure to extend respect, acknowledgment, and equitable opportunities to these Indo-African tribes, who have invested decades of silent effort in the nation's growth and development. The absence of recognition for individuals like Kamla underscores how the nation has overlooked the contributions of marginalized communities, raising serious questions about inclusivity and representation in contemporary India (Archives of Quint, 2018). Kamla Babu Siddi's story serves as a profound testament to the enduring sense of pride and collective identity that marginalized communities like the Siddis embody, despite systemic neglect and social alienation. Her journey as an athlete, representing India at the Sixth South Asian Games in Dhaka in 1993, highlights the complexities of personal and communal pride in the face of exclusionary national narratives.

Kamla's unwavering connection to her achievements reflects a deep sense of pride that transcends the lack of institutional support or societal acknowledgment. Her statement, "This is all I have. They (medals) belong to me as well as to the entire nation," reveals a profound alignment of personal accomplishment with national identity (Archives of Quint, 2018). For Kamla, her medals are not merely symbols of individual success; they are artifacts of a collective contribution to the nation's narrative. This dual ownership underscores the intrinsic desire of marginalized communities to integrate into the larger national identity while retaining pride in their unique heritage. However, Kamla's sense of pride stands in stark contrast to the systemic disregard shown towards her community. Despite her accomplishments, she laments the lack of privileges and recognition extended to her and other members of the Siddi community.

This disparity points to a disconnect in how collective identity is constructed in India. While communities like the Siddis contribute silently and significantly to the nation's progress, they are often excluded from the dominant narrative of what it means to be Indian. Kamla's words, "I have possibly done more for the country as compared to an average Indian," challenge this exclusion, calling for a reimagining of national identity that includes and honors the contributions of all communities (Archives of Quint, 2018). Kamla's journey also highlights the intersection of personal and collective identity within the Siddi community. While she takes pride in her individual achievements, her accomplishments are inseparable from the broader struggles and aspirations of her community. This shared sense of purpose and belonging strengthens the collective identity of the Siddis, even as they navigate systemic exclusion. The Siddi community's collective identity, rooted in both their Indo-African heritage and their fealty to India, provides a powerful counter-narrative to narrow definitions of national belonging. Despite being treated as outsiders because of their African ancestry, the Siddis continue to invest in the country's development, as evidenced by Kamla's pride in her accolades. Her refusal to sell her medals, even in the face of economic hardship, demonstrates a desire to preserve her contributions as part of the national legacy.

### **Hypervisibility and Problem of Rootedness Among the Siddis**

The examples of systemic neglect and social alienation faced by the Siddi community, among others, bring to light the deep-seated double standards which exist in Indian society. The Indo-African community is both hypervisible and marginalized, which creates a paradox. While the Siddis are indeed prominently featured in public narratives as symbols of diversity or athletes representing the national flag, they remain excluded from meaningful integration into mainstream Indian identity. This hypervisibility, which stems from their distinctive physical appearance and cultural heritage, exacerbates their identity disjuncture, trapping them in a perpetual state of flux between historical slavery and contemporary deprivation. Scenario as these highlights the 'representational politics' of Indian democracy that constructs the processual of a national sovereign identity based on the primordial character of assimilation rather than integration. As a society, Indians display an inherent discomfort, and perhaps even embarrassment, when people who appear "purely African-looking" march under the Indian tricolour. This sentiment reflects a deep contradiction: while diversity is celebrated rhetorically, communities like the Siddis, whose uniqueness challenges narrow notions of national identity, are frequently overlooked. The Siddi community was recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in the 1980s, ostensibly in an effort to integrate them into Indian society. However, this initiative was primarily driven by a motive to leverage their athletic potential to clinch Olympic medals, rather than a genuine effort to affirm their Indian identity or address their socioeconomic marginalization (Archives of Quint, 2018). The erroneous belief that Indo-African groups lack the intellectual capacity to participate in activities other than sports and music is the root of this disparity. Their socioeconomic marginalisation and lack of access to professional and educational possibilities have been sustained by these presumptions. Furthermore, their identity is further obliterated and they are rendered invisible from popular narratives due to the lack of representation from historical archives pertaining to their past and accomplishments. The Siddi community's hypervisibility in certain context of commodified historiography is both a burden and a paradox. On the one hand, their African ancestry and cultural distinctiveness make them visible in Indian society, where they are frequently exoticized and treated as a viable commodification source. On the other hand, their visibility becomes a barrier to integration because they are constantly perceived as outsiders. The Siddis are trapped between the historical legacy of slavery in medieval India and the loss of their ethnic identity in contemporary India. This identity disjuncture creates a state of flux in wherein the Siddis struggle to assert their roots in India. Despite having lived in the country for over 500 years, they are treated worse than the so-called "untouchables," demonstrating socio-culturally entrenched caste and racial prejudices. The Siddis' dual identity—as descendants of African slaves and

Indian citizens—makes them marginalized on both fronts, with no clear sense of belonging, forcing them to settle for the 'image of rootedness' instead of the original 'dynamic of rootedness'. Thus, for the Siddis, the process of rootedness in India is fraught with challenges. Hypervisibility ensures that they are constantly noticed but rarely understood or accepted as part of the national fabric. Their contributions, whether in sports, cultural heritage, or community resilience, are either undervalued or instrumentalised for narrow ends. Efforts to integrate them into mainstream society have often failed because they are stimulated by tokenism rather than a genuine desire for equality and inclusion. The loss of ethnic identity complicates the Siddis' quest for rootedness. The apparent lack of archives and historical narratives about their journey in India generates a void, perpetuating their invisibility in historical and cultural discourse. Without recognition of their past and affirmation of their present, the Siddis are left in a liminal space, constantly threatened by transgressing identity based on obscured lived experiences and ethnic realities.

## CONCLUSION

In the discourse over tribal autonomy and representation in India, it is critical to understand the complex interplay of cultural distinctiveness, political hypervisibility, and systemic marginalization. Tribes have long asserted themselves as culturally distinct and politically significant entities. Their hypervisibility, however, has frequently been disproportionate to their demographic strength, owing to long-standing traditions of Adivasi resistance to colonial rule and economic exploitation by landlords. This resistance stemmed in a political demand for autonomy, which envisioned territorial rights, self-governance, and resource control rather than being subsumed under a highly centralized national framework. The Indian nation-state has frequently sought to address tribal autonomy through cultural accommodation rather than political integration. This approach, known as the "culturalist reduction" of autonomy, views tribal identity as a cultural rather than a political issue. While Indian Adivasis have long advocated for a loosely knit federal structure that allows for localized self-government, both colonial and democratic administration models have repudiated such demands. Instead, a framework has emerged that acknowledges tribal autonomy in cultural terms but fails to address their political ambitions. In contemporary times, the most pressing issue confronting India's tribal communities is the "identity crisis." The Siddi tribe, for example, represents this struggle where despite being highly visible due to their African ancestry and distinct cultural heritage, the Siddis face systemic exclusion. Their commodification as cultural artefacts, combined with their lack of representation in meaningful political or economic processes, exacerbates their marginalization. This hypervisible yet disenfranchised reality illustrates the paradox confronting many tribal communities in India, where their distinctiveness is superficially celebrated but rarely translates into substantial socio-political inclusion. While the government has granted special rights to tribal communities in designated areas under Articles 342, 15(4), 330, 337, 243D, and 46 of the Constitution, lapses in implementing these provisions persist. For instance, the election of Smt. Draupadi Murmu, the first tribal woman to become President of India, was heralded as a pivotal moment for the Santhal people. However, many Santhal families continue to struggle for basic survival, as government-assigned contractors recurrently fail to provide fair wages. This dichotomy emphasizes the chasm between symbolic representation and material upliftment. A significant challenge in negotiating with tribal issues is the tendency to reduce them to subaltern subjects or minorities. Tribes like the Siddis and others possess distinct socio-cultural identities that require recognition beyond generalized frameworks. Separating tribal communities from categories such as Dalits and other minorities creates new opportunities for research and development, emphasizing their exceptional contribution to civilizational and heritage. Each tribe's distinct identity is the foundation of its culture and heritage, and recognizing this diversity is pivotal to fostering integration through autonomy.

The administrative classification of tribes as Scheduled, while intended to provide special protections, has frequently been perceived as a "tag of shame" by many tribal leaders. This categorization, while primitive in nature, provides a structural framework for tribal representation. However, it raises a question: when will tribes transition from a representative category to a fully autonomous democratic community? The conflict between representation and autonomy remains unresolved, especially in the context of caste-tribe democracy. The Siddis' hypervisible commodification in cultural and tourist spaces exacerbates this tension. While their African heritage is frequently exoticized for tourism and cultural performances, this visibility does not entail substantive recognition or autonomy. Instead, it reinforces their status as perpetual outsiders, apprehended between historical erasure and contemporary marginalization, imposing a burden on their rootedness process and projecting a subjugated agency. To address tribal communities' identity crisis and marginalization, a paradigm shift in the concept of autonomy and integration is obligated. True autonomy must transcend cultural symbolism to encompass political and economic self-determination. For the Siddis and other tribes, this means paving the way for substantive inclusion in governance, education, and resource management, as well as dismantling stereotypes that limit their potential (Youthkiawaz, 2020). The transition to an inclusive and autonomous tribal democracy requires reconciling the inherent contradictions in India's approach to tribal representation. By acknowledging tribes' distinct identities and historical contributions, the nation can function toward a framework that celebrates diversity while ensuring equity and justice. Only then will the tension between representation and autonomy be resolved, allowing tribes to establish themselves as unique status groups within a truly inclusive democratic fabric.

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