

Identity Issues of Indigenous People and the Concept of Assimilation

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In the early 20th century, scholars started expressing the view about the people that were people living and having their own culture and systems before the Europeans migrated. The early inhabitants of those regions were termed as 'indigenous' people (Beteille). Questions on appropriate terms to refer to differently positioned people, on historical, social or economic grounds have been discussed at various human rights platforms. The United Nations (UN) used officially the term for the first time in its political declaration of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002. Peters and Mika, mention that, the term 'indigenous' was regarded as 'still under debate'. One of the simple ways of defining 'Indigenous People' is that they "are people who have occupied all continents since time immemorial. They have lived on their lands, maintained their cultural values, cultivated their environment and kept their traditions alive over centuries. (Joseph 2010)

India has always played an active and positive role in international forum on issues relating to the protection of biological diversity, traditional knowledge, traditional medicine systems and linkages of intellectual property rights with these subjects. The country has also contributed meaningfully to the drafting of international legal laws for protecting the rights of the people and communities involved. It is one of the few countries that has valued and developed indigenous access and devised a benefit-sharing mechanism for genetic resources and related to traditional knowledge even before the Convention on Biological Diversity came into force and pushed for prior informed consent (Chaturvedi).

Andre Beteille on the other hand explains the evolution of the word 'tribes' for certain groups of India. He speaks about the usage of

different terms in the past such as ‘primitive’ which fell out of favour after World War II, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘hill and forest tribes’, ‘aboriginal tribes’ (‘adivasis’) and then highlights that the term ‘Scheduled Tribes’ was adopted by the government of India even before the Independence. He opines that in India “both tribal and non-tribal populations have undergone many alterations through usurpation, miscegenation, and migration” and by the middle of the 19th century the tribes of today have largely been “either subordinated or marginalised economically, politically and socially”.

The terms “tribe,” “Adivasi,” and “Vanvasi” have often been used interchangeably in the Indian context, leading to confusion and ambiguity. The term “Adivasi” is the collective name for the many indigenous peoples of India, derived from the Hindi words “Adi” meaning “from the beginning” and “vasi” meaning “inhabitant” (Rowkith and Bhagwan). These indigenous communities have a distinct cultural, social, and economic way of life that sets them apart from the mainstream population. (Nayak et al.)

Rycroft D.J & Dasgupta, S states clearly that the literal meaning of Adivasi as “original inhabitants” permits these communities “to position themselves, strategically and politically, as Indigenous People in the global arena.” Dasgupta, Sangeeta opines that the term ‘adivasi’ is a politically assertive term and that it “came into use for the first time in 1938, in a political context”.

The term ‘Adivasi’ is presently used in common discourse and media reports in India and abroad, for all the tribal people of India, irrespective of whether the tribe is included in the list of Scheduled Tribes or not. In fact, Adivasi is not a single group of people but belongs to different tribes, settled in different states and places, including cities, practitioners of different religions, speak different languages belonging to different language families and have different cultural and social practices. At the same time, there is also no consensus among academics and civil society organisations as to the use of the term ‘Adivasi’ which literally means, original or early settlers in Sanskrit (Adi=first plus vasi=resident).

Identity Crisis

Over the past decades, the global stage has seen a growing involvement of indigenous people in international forums addressing a wide range of issues, from human rights to sustainable development, forest and biodiversity conservation, international trade, and intellectual property rights. Central to their participation is the effort to ensure that their rights are recognized and respected, aiming to prevent further marginalization or the destruction of their livelihoods, cultures, and communities. However, amid this increased engagement, indigenous people face an identity crisis, as the pressures of globalization, development agendas, and external cultural influences often threaten the preservation of their unique traditions, social structures, and ways of life. The struggle to maintain their cultural integrity while participating in global processes highlights the deep-rooted challenges they encounter in preserving their identity in a rapidly changing world.

Indigenous peoples around the world have long grappled with the complex issue of identity, navigating the tensions between their unique cultural traditions and the pressures of assimilation into dominant societal structures (Bruyneel).

The complex and multifaceted nature of indigenous identity is explored in the literature (Weaver). Identity is not a static construct, but rather a dynamic interplay of various factors, including race, class, education, region, religion, and gender. As these different aspects of identity evolve over time, the sense of self as an indigenous person is also subject to constant renegotiation and redefinition.

The international indigenous peoples' movement has emerged in response to the failure of states to adequately protect the rights and interests of communities now asserting their indigenous identity. Instead of simply requesting welfare programs, indigenous peoples are advocating for recognition as sovereign groups with the inherent right to self-governance. This includes control over their ancestral territories and the natural resources within them. As noted by Anaya, "indigenous people seek recognition as distinct political entities, with the autonomy to make

decisions regarding their lands and resources.” In this regard, the principle of self-determination is crucial, as it empowers indigenous communities to decide whether external activities like mining or other industrial operations will be allowed on their lands. The **Fifth and Sixth Schedules** of the Indian Constitution offer special protections for tribal regions, yet enforcement remains weak, and large-scale displacement continues. As **Xaxa (2014)** explains, “tribal communities in India have been systematically alienated from their lands due to the expansion of mining and industrial projects, leading to widespread discontent and identity loss.”

The Complexities of Indigenous Identity Formation in a Multicultural World

The position and rights of indigenous peoples gained a foothold at the political arenas of the world and in international agreements since the turn of the 1990s when indigenous peoples and minorities were started to be distinguished from each other. Indigenous peoples were considered to have collective rights regarding control over certain areas colonized by the mainstream population at a certain point of history (Koivurova).

Indigenous peoples are notable for having collective rights, particularly with regard to their languages, cultures, and social and political institutions, which set them apart from other ethnic minorities. Indigenous peoples prioritize the defence of collective rights over individual rights, even though both groups deal with problems like marginalization, language loss, and discrimination. Indigenous identity is heavily reliant on self-identification since belonging to the group and being accepted by them are fundamental components of cultural identity. It can be a difficult and bureaucratic process, though. According to Joona, self-identification is relevant for both individuals and groups, highlighting the connections between group identity and personal identity. Although these worries are a natural part of adolescence, significant cross-cultural interaction makes cultural identity a more important topic (Berry).

Overall, both internal group dynamics and external cultural interactions have a significant impact on the formation and acceptance of indigenous identity, which presents significant challenges for indigenous people, especially the youth as well as the indigenous women. The national or societal level brings additional complexities according to bicultural, multicultural, and hybrid types of identity (Markstrom). For indigenous youth, the process of identity formation is especially challenging as they must navigate the intersection of local, national, and global influences. While the global implications of this process are not yet fully understood, examining the experiences of indigenous youth in other parts of the world can provide valuable insights.

The indigenous women in India face unique challenges, both as keepers of cultural knowledge and as victims of displacement and exploitation. Rao highlights that “the role of indigenous women in protecting both their cultural heritage and their rights to land is often overlooked, making them more vulnerable to exploitation by both the state and private actors.” This often leads not just to identity crisis but also a lack of confidence, low self-esteem and problems alike that hinders their social, economic and psychological growth.

Struggles for Sovereignty: Indigenous Identity, Rights, and the Battle for Recognition

In recent decades, there has been a notable global rebirth of indigenous movements in recent years, calling for control over natural resources, sovereignty, and cultural preservation. The struggle for recognition as distinct peoples with the right to self-govern and defend their ancestral territories, rather than just as marginalized communities, is at the heart of these efforts. Their fight for survival and self-determination in this setting is centered on problems like self-identification, land rights, and resistance to outside exploitation.

This means that indigenous communities should have the authority to determine who is considered indigenous within their group. According to Kymlicka, “the right to define who belongs to a group is essential to maintaining the cultural integrity and continuity of that group.” However,

self-identification is a complex and delicate issue, particularly in the context of rising demands from various communities seeking recognition as indigenous. This creates challenges, especially when state policies, economic interests, or political considerations intersect with indigenous self-determination. As outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, “indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions.”

The issue of self-identification also resonates in India, where the boundaries between Scheduled Tribes and other marginalized groups can be blurred. As Baviskar notes, “the process of defining who qualifies as indigenous or tribal in India is fraught with political implications, especially in terms of access to resources and affirmative action policies.” This creates further complexities in recognizing who is entitled to land and resource rights, especially in light of ongoing disputes over tribal identity and governance.

Similarly in the Indian context, the indigenous peoples’ movement mirrors the global struggle for autonomy, land rights, and cultural preservation. Known as Adivasis, these indigenous communities have long been marginalized by mainstream development projects, often losing their traditional lands to industries such as mining and deforestation. According to Minority Rights Group International, the Adivasi population in India constitutes around 7% of the total population, making them one of the largest indigenous populations in the world (Rowkith and Bhagwan). The Adivasi communities are spread across 705 different communities, representing a rich and diverse cultural heritage. It further explicates that the term Adivasi is the collective name of “many indigenous peoples of India”. On the use of the term, it says that “it was coined in the 1930s, arguably a consequence of a political movement to forge a sense of identity among the various indigenous peoples of India.”

In this context, Indian tribal movements are deeply intertwined with broader questions of development, environmental conservation, and human rights. The PESA Act, which grants local governance rights to tribal communities, is one of the key legal frameworks through which

indigenous peoples in India have sought to reclaim their rights. However, as Shah observes, “the implementation of PESA has been occasional at best, with many states declining its provisions in favour of industrial interests.

The inability of states to sufficiently defend the rights and interests of communities that today identify as indigenous has given rise to the global movement of indigenous peoples. These groups support recognition as distinct peoples with the right to self-governance, rather than welfare policies. Control over their customary lands and the natural resources found therein are part of this. By deciding whether outside activities, like mining, are permitted on their territory, indigenous peoples preserve their agency. The right to self-identification, which allows indigenous communities to determine who is eligible for indigenous governance, is another essential component. It is particularly difficult to go through this self-identification process now that there are demands from different communities around the world for indigenous status, which makes recognition and governance more difficult.

Indigenous people have their own different languages, culture, social and political establishments that may vary significantly from those of mainstream society. They also face issues such as discrimination, language loss, and marginalization. However, a key difference lies in how they approach their rights and identity. Contrasting ethnic minorities who focus on individual rights, indigenous communities emphasize the importance of recognizing their collective rights.

Self-identification for an indigenous person and acceptance by the indigenous community are key to one’s cultural identity. But problems can occur when someone identifies as indigenous but isn’t recognized by the group. Joona brings to light that: ‘It should be noted that, even though self-identification is generally used to refer to peoples, the term also includes an individual’s feeling. Without individuals there are no groups. Logically, the definition of a group and the definition of an individual cannot be fully separated’ (Joona 147.) Acceptance of one’s indigenous identity as indigenous member can be challenging. When acceptance of an individual identity fails it may lead to serious

psychological problems such as stress, trauma, and angst. Indigenous identity is a crucial part of an individual person's identity (Sarivaara, Sarivaara et al.).

When individuals experience intercultural contact, the issue of who they are comes to the forefront. Prior to major contact, this question is hardly an issue; people routinely and naturally think of themselves as part of their cultural community, and usually value this attachment in positive terms. Of course, other life transitions (such as adolescence) can lead people to wonder, and even doubt, who they are. But it is only during intercultural contact that their cultural identity may become a matter of concern (Berry).

Dominant development paradigms unsuited to indigenous people

Indigenous peoples' societies have often been regarded as "backward, primitive and uncivilized", where their "development" is understood to be their assimilation into the so-called "civilized world." Since the Second World War, the concept of development has often been conceived in strictly economic terms. It was thought to follow an evolutionary process that commenced from basic commodity suppliers, through capital accumulation to industrialization, in turn leading to urbanization and "modernization". Development paradigms of modernization and industrialization have often resulted in the destruction of indigenous peoples' political, economic, social, cultural, education, health, spiritual and knowledge systems as well as extraction of their natural resources.

The culture and values of indigenous people are often seen to be contradictory to the values of the market economy, such as the accumulation of profit, hyper consumption and competitiveness. Indigenous people also are seen as "hindrances" to progress because their lands and territories are rich in natural resources and they are not willing to freely dispose of them.

In many countries, the history and the continuing practice of acclimatization has resulted in blanket public policies that have excluded

indigenous people and have been discriminated on the basis of culture and identity. The pursuit of economic growth at all costs is not only destructive for indigenous people but also for the rest of humanity and the planet. The focus on GDP as a main measure of progress has distorted the true meaning of progress and wellbeing. For example, damage to ecosystem, irreversible loss in biological diversity and the erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity and indigenous traditional knowledge, cannot be categorized in the balance sheet. Such ecological, cultural, social and spiritual indicators, which provide more comprehensive measurements of national and global situations, are rarely used.

Indigenous concepts of well-being and sustainability

Understanding the diverse cultural contexts of India is critical to create sustainable social change. Embracing inclusivity, respecting local customs and establishing meaningful connections with the indigenous people may lead to a conducive environment that promotes sustainability and well-being.

The failure of the dominant development model, as has been demonstrated by the enduring global economic crisis, the environmental crisis of climate change and the erosion of biological diversity, indicates the need to develop alternative ways of developmental perspectives. Indigenous peoples' visions and viewpoints of development provide some of these alternatives that should be considered and discussed further.

The concept of development of 'Indigenous people' is based on a holistic outlook reinforced by the values of mutuality, harmony, symmetry and jointly, understanding that humans should live within the boundaries of the natural world. Development with culture and identity is characterized by a holistic approach that seeks to build on collective rights, security and greater control and self-governance of lands, territories and resources. It builds on tradition, with respect for ancestors, but is also forward-looking. It includes social, cultural, political and spiritual systems. Indigenous peoples' interpretations of well-being have a number of common elements, such as, importance of collective economic actors and community economic institutions. Integrity of indigenous governance

should not only be considered in terms of profit but rather in terms of improving quality of life and enriching the notion of development where human beings are in harmony with mother 'Earth'. It should also focus on recognising the efforts of the indigenous people and the contribution to the preservation of resources and further provide financial aids and motivation to strengthen the indigenous peoples' knowledge institutions.

Conclusion

The intricate interactions between indigenous peoples' collective rights, cultural heritage, and assimilation pressures are at the core of their identity issues. The preservation of collective rights over land, language, and cultural practices is a priority for indigenous peoples, in contrast to ethnic minorities, whose conflicts frequently revolve around individual rights. To preserve indigenous identity, self-identification and group acceptance are essential, but achieving these goals can be difficult due to bureaucratic roadblocks and the possibility of social exclusion. The challenges indigenous people have in maintaining their cultural distinctiveness can be made worse by psychological distress resulting from an inability to reconcile personal and group identities. It is thus very crucial to support indigenous peoples' efforts to preserve their cultural integrity while also acknowledging and defending their collective rights. The global community must initiate such policies and practices that support cultural diversity and uphold the autonomy of indigenous communities' top priority as indigenous peoples continue to demand their rights on international forums. Indigenous peoples can only flourish in a multicultural society if the conflict between identity and assimilation is lessened through such initiatives.

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