Introduction

The tribal population is found in almost all parts of the world. India has the largest concentration of tribal population. Total population of Scheduled Tribes is 84,326,240 as per the Census 2001 which accounts for 8.2% of the total population of country.

The tribals are the autochthonous people of the land who are believed to be the earliest settlers in Indian Peninsula. They are generally called the adivasis, implying original inhabitants. A tribe is a homogeneous and self contained unit without any hierarchical discrimination. Each tribe enjoyed equal status. Each tribe had its own system of administration. There was decentralization of authority among the tribes. In this unit, an outline of the Indian tribes, particularly their geographical classification, linguistic classification, racial, economic and cultural divisions will be given.

Popular Names of Indian Tribes

The tribes of India live in the forest hills and naturally isolated regions known as a rule by different names meaning either the people of forest and hill or the original inhabitants, and so on. The popular names are:

Vanyajati (castes of forest), Vanvasi (inhabitants of forest), Pahari (hill-dwellers), Adimjati (original communities), Adivasi (first settlers), Janjati (folk people), Anusuchitjanjati (scheduled tribe) and so on. Among all these tribes the term Adivasi is
the most popular term. *Anusuchit Janjati* (Scheduled Tribe) is the constitutional name covering all of them.

**Geographical Distribution of the tribes**

The tribes of India on the basis of geography of India and tribal demography can be classified regionally.

Guha (1951, 1955) demarcated three tribal zones. They are (i) northern and north-eastern area, (ii) the Central belt and (iii) the Peninsular India. Majumdar and Madan (1956) also refer to these zones and present a somewhat similar distribution. They have called them Northern and North-Eastern Zone, the Central or Middle Zone, and the Southern Zone. Dube (1960) has classified the geographical regions of the tribals into four zones, the North and North-Eastern Zone, the Middle Zone, the South Zone and the West Zone. Again Roy Burman (1971) divided the tribal communities living in different regions into five territorial groups.

Taking into consideration, the geographical, ecological, social, economic, administrative, ethnic, and racial factors, Vidyarthi and Rai (1976) proposed a four-fold geographical region along with one distinct sub-region of the islands. These are:
• Himalayan Region, with three sub-regions, viz.
  - North-Eastern Himalayan region
  - Assam, Meghalaya, mountainous region of West Bengal, i.e. Darjeeling, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura fall in this region.
  - Central Himalayan Region and
  - The Tarai areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar fall in this group
• North-Western Himalayan region:
  - Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir constitute this region.
• Middle India Region: It comprises Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh.
• Western India Region: It includes Rajasthan Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli.
• South India Region: It comprises Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala with a meagre tribal population.
• The Island Region: The islands of Andaman and Nicobar in the Bay of Bengal and Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea constitute a distinct sub-region.

Linguistic classification

The linguistic map of India and the languages found among the tribals indicate that the Dravidian linguistic family is found in the Dravidian region in South India and a few
pockets in middle India in Chotanagpur and north-western border near Baluchistan. Another linguistic family, Austro-Asiatic, is found in certain pockets in the north-eastern Himalayan region in Meghalaya, in Nicobar Islands and extensively in middle India and adjoining western India. Tibeto-Chinese is the third language which is traced on the map and is prevalent all along the Himalayan region. The Indo-European language is found in the remaining part of India.

All these suggest a linguistic drift from north-western to southern India and again in the pockets of middle India in the case of Dravidian languages. There is much controversy regarding the origin of the Austro-Asiatic language. W.Schmidt named the Munda language as Austro-Asiatic. Hutton opined that the Austro-Asiatic language was brought by the Kolarians through the west end of the Himalayas and by the Mon Khmer speaking people from the east of the Himalayas. The Tibeto-Burmese language entered India from the north and spread all along the Himalayas.

Thus the tribes of India speak different languages in different regions and groups, and can broadly be classified into four main linguistic families. These are:

- **Austro-Asiatic Family:**
  - Mon-Khmer Branch: Khasi and Nicobari
  - Munda Branch: Santhali, Kharwari, Ho, Mundari, Gondi, Kharia, Savara, Khond, Gadaba, etc.

- **Tibeto-Chinese Family:**
  - Siamese-Chinese sub-family:
  - Tai group: Khampti, Phakial, etc.
  - Tibeto-Burman sub-family:
• Tibeto-Himalayan Branch: Bhotias of Darjeeling
• Western sub-group of Pronominalized Himalayan group: Chamba, Lahauli, Swangli, Kanauri, etc.
• Non-Prominalized Himalayan Group: Rong or Lepcha, Toto, etc.
• Arunachal Branch: Aka or Hrusso, Abot, Miri, Dafla, Mishmi, etc.
• Assam-Burmese Branch:
• Bara or Bodo Group: Plains Kachari, Dimasa or (Hill) Kachari, Garo, Tripura, etc.
• Naga Group:
  (i) Naga sub-group: Angami, Ao, Sema, Rengma, etc.
  (b) Kuki-Chin Group: Kuki, Paite, Mar, Thadou, Ralte, Lushai, etc
• Dravidian Family:
  Dravidian group: Korawa, Yerukala, Yarava, Badaga, Toda, Kota, Kurukh or Oraon, Malto or Maler, Kui Kandhi or Khond Gondi, etc.
• Indo-European Family:
  Hajong, Bhili, etc.

**Racial Classification**

Guha, Hutton and Majumdar attempted to provide racial classifications of the Indian people. Guha’s (1935) classification is the most accepted classification. He lists six main races, with nine sub-types of Indian population.
1. Negrito
2. The Proto-Australoid
3. The Mongoloid:
4. Palaeo-Mongoloids
5. long-headed
6. broad-headed
7. Tibeto-Mongoloids
8. The Mediterranean:
9. Palaeo-Mediterranean
10. Mediterranean
11. Oriental type
12. The Western Brachycephals:
13. Alpinoid
14. Dinaric
15. Armenoid
16. The Nordic

As regards the racial composition of tribes of India Guha (1952) has given the following conclusions:

1. The Kadars, the Irulas, and the Paniyans of South India, with frizzy hair have undoubted Negro strain.
2. The tribes of middle India belong to the Proto-Australoid stock.
3. The brachycephalic Mongoloids of north-eastern India have typical features of the face and the eye.
4. A slightly different Mongoloid type with medium stature, high head and medium nose lives in the Brahmaputra valley.

Guha (1935) classified the tribes of India into three major categories:

1. The Proto-Australoids
2. This group is characterized by dark skin color, sunken nose and lower forehead. For example, the Munda, the Oraon, the Ho, the Gond, The Khond, etc.
3. The Mongoloids
4. Tribal people of the Himalayan region, specifically of north Himalaya come under this category.

5. The Negrito

6. The Kadars of Kerala and the Andamanese of the Andaman Island fall in this category.

**Classification Based on culture**

The tribes form an integral part of the Indian population. Their socio-economic life, religious beliefs are distinct and their association with the Hindu neighbors for a long time has all given a definitive character to their lives. Various authorities are trying to find out the level of integration with the rest of the Indian people and their culture.

Majumdar (1947) classified them into three groups:

- Primitive tribes outside the Hindu influence, that is, the so-called *real-primitives*
- Primitive tribes which have adopted Hindu customs, beliefs and practices, have shown a degree of association with the Hindu castes and have attained some cultural progress, though they are not recognized as forming prominent castes.
- Primitive tribes who are Hinduized but maintain social distance from the clean castes, though some of them are not distinguished from the inferior ranks of the caste order, inferior or clean.

In the above classification Hinduism is regarded as an important agent of change so far as tribal culture is concerned.

Majumdar again gives a general classification and agreed that there is hardly any tribal community who is not in contact with the rest of Indian population:

(a) Assimilated

(b) Adaptive (the so-called transitional culture):
   (i) Commensallic (common economic pursuits with neighbors)
   (ii) Symbiotic (interdependence)
   (iii) Acculturative (one-way traffic of cultural traits)

Elwin (1943) gave a four-fold classification on the basis of external influence on tribal life:
1. Those who are most primitive live a joint communal life and cultivate with axes.
2. Those who, though equally attached to their solitude and ancient traditions, are more individualistic, less occupied with axe-cultivation, more used to outside life and generally less simple than the first group.
3. Those, the most numerous, probably 20 million, who are under external influence and are already on the way to lose their tribal culture, religion, and social organization.
4. Tribes like the Bhil and the Naga, which retain much of their original tribal life and free of culture contact.

Dube (1960) also proposed a more or less similar classification like Elwin. The Tribal Welfare Committee constituted by the Indian Conference of Social Work in 1952 divided the tribes of India into four main divisions:

- Tribal Communities—tribes, who confine themselves to original habitats and are still distinctive in their pattern of life.
- Semi-tribal Communities—tribes, who have more or less settled down in rural areas taking to agriculture and other allied occupations.
- Acculturated Tribal Communities—tribes, who have migrated to urban or semi-urban areas and are engaged in modern occupations in industries and have adopted traits and culture of the rest of the population.
- Totally assimilated tribes.
Roy Burman (1971) also classified the tribes of India into four groups on the basis of their orientation towards the Hindu social order. They are as follows:

- Incorporated in the Hindu social order
- Positively oriented towards the Hindu social order
- Negatively oriented towards the Hindu social order
- Indifferent towards the Hindu social order.

After going through the above classifications and taking into consideration the factors of Hinduization, external influence, culture contact, neighborhood, welfare, etc. Vidyarthi and Rai (1976) have assessed the level of integration of the tribes of India as follows:

1. Distinct Tribal Communities living in highly isolated regions, e.g. the forest hunting tribes and the hill cultivators.
2. Rural Tribals who are living in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture and other allied occupations, e.g. agriculturist tribes.
3. Semi-Acculturated Tribals who have successfully blended their own cultural traditions with the neighboring people and the situation, e.g. the tribal communities living in mixed villages.
4. Acculturated Tribals who have adopted modern occupations in urban and industrial fields and have mixed to a great extent with the rest of the population, e.g. industrial laborers.
5. Totally Assimilated Tribals who have acquired a place in the Hindu caste ladder, e.g. the Bhumij, the Majhis, the Khasas, the Raj Gonds, etc.

**Economic Classification**

The tribes of India have been broadly classified into eight groups on the basis of their primary occupations. They are as follows:
1. Forest-Hunting Type: Examples—The Birhors and Hill Khariyas of middle India belong to this group
2. Hill Cultivation Type: Examples—the Ao Nagas, Rengma Nagas of Nagaland and Purums of Manipur
3. Settled Agricultural Type: Examples—Mundas, Hos, and Santhals of middle India.
4. Simple Artisan Type: Example—The Gujjars of Kashmir and Kanjars of Uttar Pradesh
5. Cattle-Herder Type: Example—Todas of Nilgiri and Kurubas of Mysore
6. Labor, Agricultural and Industrial Type: Example—Tribes of Bihar, Orissa, Bengal etc.
7. Folk-Artist Type: Example—Nats and Saperas of south-eastern Uttar Pradesh
8. White-Collar Jobs and Trader type: Example—Bhotiyas of Almora and Garhwal of Uttar Pradesh

**Conclusion**

The tribes of different parts of India are passing through an accelerated phase of transformation and have greatly disturbed the equilibrium in the traditional society. As a result of their long and continuous contacts with the regional Hindu castes, many tribal groups have long been assimilated as castes in the regional caste hierarchy. Numerous other tribes have undergone selective acculturation and have added selected traits or features of the regional Hindu castes. In this process, they have failed to occupy any rank in the caste hierarchy. The spread of Christianity through the Western missionaries succeeded in bringing about a marked change in the sacred, social, educational and economic status of the converted tribal groups. In recent years, urbanization and
industrialization have brought about revolutionary changes in some parts of tribal India. These have led to the development of communications within the tribal areas and with the outside world, introduced monetized economy, spread formal and modern education, led to the extension of facilities like medical and administrative aids and introduction of advanced technology to exploit the mineral, forest, power and other industrial resources. But the rate of change evidently differs among different types of tribes. Moreover, they have retained the traditional elements of their ways of life, though these are modified to a greater or lesser extent.