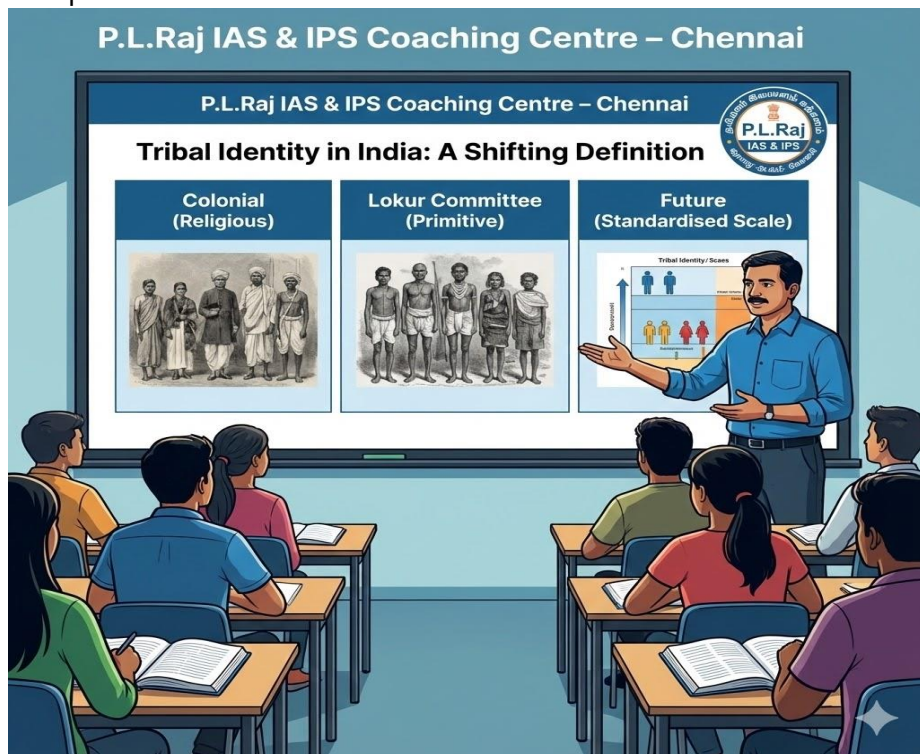


Redefining the Indigenous – The Quest for a Modern Tribal Identity in India.

Introduction

The definition of who constitutes a "Scheduled Tribe" (ST) in India is currently at a critical juncture. Recently, the Anthropological Survey of India (ANSI) hosted discussions to establish a "standardized scale" for defining tribal identity. This move stems from the realization that the current criteria—rooted in colonial anthropology—are outdated, often pejorative, and insufficient to handle the socio-political complexities of modern India



The Traditional Definition and Colonial Legacy.

Historically, the classification of tribes in India was not based on self-identification but was an administrative construct imposed by the colonial state.

The Religious Lens (1901) – In the early 20th century, the British administration distinguished tribes primarily through religion. The 1901 Census categorized them as those practising "**Animism**" (worship of nature/spirits), as opposed to "Castes" who practised Hinduism.

The Shift to Backwardness (1931–1935) – By 1931, the focus shifted

from religion to social indices. The census listed "backward tribes," leading to the Government of India Act, 1935, which created formal schedules (lists) for provinces. By 1941, the definition focused on origin rather than spiritual practice.

Post-Independence – The 1950 ST list aimed to identify communities that required special protection due to their isolation, but the underlying assumption remained that these groups were "primitive."

The Lokur Committee (1965) – The Benchmark Criteria In the post-independence era, the most significant framework for defining Scheduled Tribes came from the Lokur Committee (1965). It established five criteria which are still technically in use today –

1. **Indications of Primitive Traits** – Reliance on traditional, often pre-agricultural technology.
2. **Distinctive Culture** – Unique customs, languages, and rituals.
3. **Geographical Isolation** – Living in remote forests or hills.
4. **Shyness of Contact** – Reluctance to interact with the general community.
5. **Backwardness** – Educational and economic deprivation.

Critique – The Lokur Committee viewed tribal status as a transitional phase. It operated on the assumption of "integration," implying that as communities advanced, they should be "de-scheduled."

The Necessity of Revising Tribal Identity

Why is the Anthropological Survey of India pushing for a change now?

1. **Pejorative Terminology** – Scholars and the Xaxa Committee (2014) have argued that terms like "primitive" and "backward" are paternalistic and derogatory. They reflect a colonial mindset of social evolution where tribes are seen as "lesser" than mainstream society.
2. **Changing Realities** – Many tribal communities today are no longer geographically isolated or "shy of contact." They participate in the modern economy and democracy. Applying 1965 criteria to 2025 realities is administratively impossible.

3. **Definition by Negation** – The Xaxa Committee noted that tribes were historically defined by what they were not (not Hindu, not Muslim, not modern). A positive definition based on their actual traits is missing.

Status of Tribes – The Tribe-Caste Continuum

A major complexity in defining tribes is the "Tribe-Caste Continuum." In India, tribal societies have not always been static. Over centuries, many tribal groups have been absorbed into the Hindu caste hierarchy (often at the lower rungs), while others maintained a distinct identity free from the concepts of "purity and pollution." Furthermore, the religious status of tribes is a site of intense political contestation.

The Conversion Debate – Unlike the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, which is religiously restricted (mostly to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists), the ST category is secular. However, there are growing political demands to deny ST status to tribals who convert to Christianity or Islam, complicating the definition further.

Sarna Code – Simultaneously, there is a movement to recognize indigenous faiths (like Sarna) to prevent the "Hinduisation" of tribal culture.

Significance of Classifying Tribal Identity – The classification is not merely an academic exercise; it has violent socio-political consequences.

Resource Allocation – Classification determines eligibility for Reservations (jobs/education) and protection under laws like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Atrocities Act.

Social Unrest – As seen recently in Manipur and other states, when advanced communities demand ST status, it triggers violent unrest from existing tribal groups who fear their share of the "reservation pie" will shrink. A standardized scale is needed to objectively adjudicate these competing claims.

Way Forward

The path ahead requires balancing anthropological rigor with administrative necessity.

1. **Adopting a Standardised Scale** – As proposed by ANSI, the government must move to a "systematic checklist" that measures "tribal-ness" through tangible variables – linguistic practices, distinct social institutions, demographic traits, and health indicators, rather than vague notions of "primitiveness."
2. **Dynamic Lists** – The list of STs cannot be static. There must be a transparent mechanism for both inclusion and exclusion based on empirical data rather than political vote-bank pressure.
3. **Preserving Self-Identification** – While economic criteria are important, the core of tribal identity lies in self-identification and community acceptance.
4. **Academic-Political Balance** – The government must navigate the difficult balance between academic classification (what anthropologists say) and socio-political realities (what communities demand).

Conclusion

This evolution of tribal identity in India is akin to the shifting definition of a frontier. What was once a simple line drawn by religion in 1901 became a zone of 'backwardness' in 1965. Today, it must evolve into a multidimensional understanding that respects the dignity of indigenous communities. Revising the criteria is not just about updating a list, it is about acknowledging that tribal communities are dynamic, modern participants in the Indian Republic who retain a distinct cultural heritage. The new "standardised scale" must ensure that justice is delivered to the genuinely marginalized without succumbing to political expediency.

Mains Practice Question

1. Critically analyze the imperative to replace the colonial notion of 'primitiveness' with a 'standardised scale' for defining Tribal identity in India, considering the socio-political complexities of the 'Tribe-Caste Continuum'.

Answer Guidelines

1. Introduction

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Contextualize with the Anthropological Survey of India's (ANSI) recent initiative to update tribal criteria. Highlight the conflict between the existing Lokur Committee (1965) criteria (Primitiveness, Geographical Isolation) and modern realities.

2. Body

1. The Case for Revision (Academic & Moral)

Pejorative Terminology – Citing the **Xaxa Committee (2014)**, argue that terms like "primitive" and "backward" are paternalistic and ignore the rich cultural heritage of tribes.

Definition by Negation – Criticism that current definitions focus on what tribes are not (not Hindu, not modern) rather than their distinct traits.

Changing Realities – Acknowledge that tribes are no longer "shy of contact" but are active participants in the modern economy and democracy.

2. The Socio-Political Complexities

Tribe-Caste Continuum – Discuss the administrative difficulty in distinguishing between tribes and lower-rung castes due to historical assimilation, necessitating a precise "standardised scale" (linguistics, rituals).

Resource Conflict – Analyze how vague definitions lead to social unrest (e.g., advanced communities demanding ST status), diluting benefits for the genuinely marginalized.

3. Conclusion – Conclude that a standardized scale is essential to move from a "colonial administrative construct" to a dignity-based identification. Emphasize that the new criteria must balance anthropological rigor with the constitutional goal of substantive equality.

