

INTRODUCTION

The primitive inhabitants of India are known as the Adivasis. From time immemorial a great human race had been living in this vast country, but to day they are being neglected in their own land.¹ It's a pity that, the infiltrators are now thinking about the preservation of their rights. They are indeed the original residents of pre-Aryan India. Owing to the Aryan invasion and Aryan settlements, they were driven out of their homestead and had to take shelter in woods and forests, hills and mountains. But it was a *boon in disguise*. As they were not influenced by the Aryan civilisation, they did not change, and could maintain their own uniqueness. That is why till today a distinct cultural stream can be seen flowing through their rituals, customs and lifestyle.² But according to the narrow outlook of present day socio-economic infrastructure, they are considered to be backward community hence the term Adivasi is quite appropriate for them.

The opinions of the anthropologists are:

Dr. Rivers said – “They belong to such a class of society who have no complexity in their lives, who speak some language, who have similarity in form, who have ‘Panchayat’ for law and order, and in necessary who come forward with a class consciousness to fight or revolt.”³

Piddington comments – “They are the members of such a group who speak the same language, occupy the same land, and have homogeneity in their cultural life.”⁴

According to Prof. Dhirendranath Majumder – the aboriginal society

is the collection of a few families or a family of the same tribes who have similarity in their names, live in a particular region, use the same language, follow the same religious norms in profession and marriage and have a co-ordination among themselves.⁵ These definitions uphold the basic characteristics of the aboriginal populace. In fact there is no hard and fast rule that, they will always live in the same region. There are many who roam like nomads and change their habitat very often. However, the aboriginals are primitive, but the tag "Adivasi" is not at all primitive. As far as can be traced, Thakkar Bapa first coined this phrase, later Gandhiji started using the name. It is being used as the synonym of the English word 'tribe'. Terms like 'upajati', 'khandajati' or 'janajati' are also in use by many people. So the topic needs a little discussion. It seems, the word 'tribe' can reveal all the specialities of the oldest generation very precisely, but these words cannot do that. First let us take the word 'Adivasi'; their expression is in a sense vague because if we say "they are the oldest resident of this village" we do not mean the original residents, but point out to the people who had been living there from the time when the village was set up. Moreover, during the Left Front regime the West Bengal Government has started using the word 'upajati' in a broader sense, and opened 'Upajati Cultural Centre' in Jhargram and Suri.⁶ But the term 'upa' is use to show humble in rank and the word 'upajati' is like tributary quite separate from the main stream. It is not fair to say that the oldest people are separate from the greater human society of the country. It is the aboriginals who are the root of the society. From ages they have been following a typical social structure, and till today they are distinct in their own culture and characteristics. The coined phrases, which cannot give

the complete identity of a human race, should not be supported and hence should be put aside. These aboriginals, in order to protect their entity lagged behind and were victimised by the country's socio-economic system and came to be known as 'Adivasis' in course of time. The anthropologists and educationists should check out this subject. Any way, the word 'Adivasi' although vague is not that much offensive, so we will use this word in our discussion.

The aboriginals are divided into three groups according to their physical stature, Facial-cut etc. ⁷

1. Negroito - Negroitos are imagined to be the first and oldest inhabitants of India. They very much resemble with the Negroes of Africa. They are short, dark, thick and curly haired. Thick lipped. Their heads are long. Round and flat. The Kadars, Irular's of South India and the Jarowas and the Orgies of the Andaman belong to this group.
2. Proto-Australoids – Proto Australoids are medium sized, dusky or dark, flat nosed with pressed top and curly haired. They occupy the whole of central, eastern and southern India. The Oraons, Mundas, Santals, Birhors, Kole, Bhils, Lodhas, Savars of central and eastern India the Chenchus, Kurmbas and Badamas of south India belong to this group.
3. Mongoloids - The Mongoloids are middled sized, fair, and flat faced with high cheek, straight haired. They have no hair, beard or moustache on their body or head. Their eyes are typically Mongolian. The Lepchas, Toros, Kabhas Chakmas and Maghs belong to this group.

The Mongolians live in the foothills of the Himalayas. They are very much associated with the people of Nepal, Bhutan and China.

The aboriginals are classified into four groups according to language:

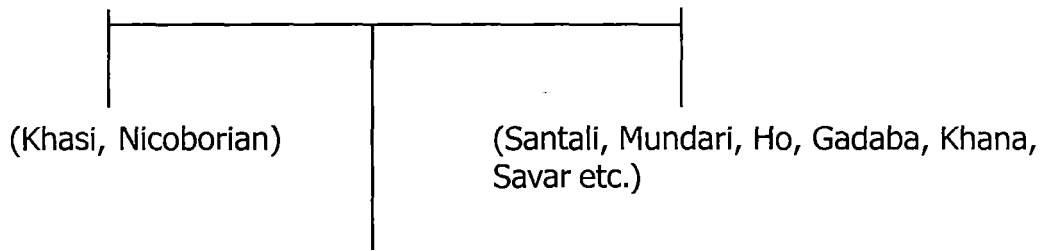
1. Austro-Asian Class –

People belonging to the Austro Asian language group are scattered over north-eastern Himalayas, central and western India and the Microbar Islands.⁸ There are differences of opinions regarding their language. The language the Proto-Australoid people used was called "Austroloid: which laid the foundation of Bengali. A number of words in Bengali liken bear witness to this truth. 'Mundari' is the main branch of this language, which is spoken by the Santals, Mundas, Hos, Karwar, Juangs, and Korbus and so on. Austric words are found in most language of India, but in Bengali the words are many. However, the Austro-Asiatic language is divided into two categories:⁹

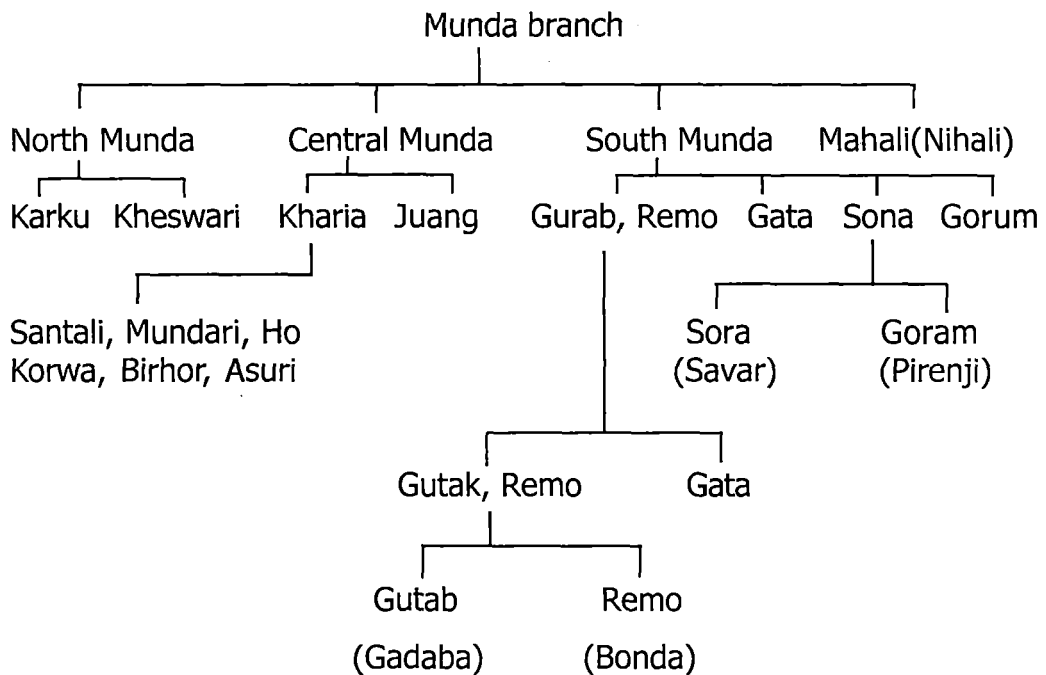
a) Mon-Khmer branch and
Austro Asiatic Class
Mon-Khmer branch

b) Munda branch.

Munda branch



Again, the Mundari branch can be spread in this way.

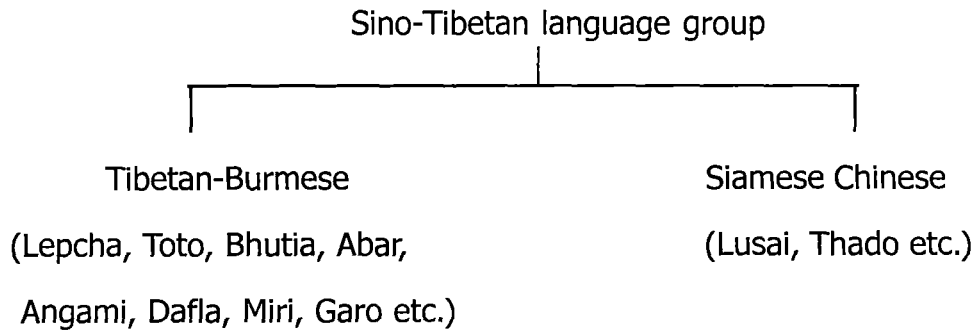


2. The Dravidian language group –

People speaking in this language live in different parts of south and central India. Toto Oraon, Gond, Khond etc. comes under this category.¹⁰

3. Sino-Tibetan language group –

People belonging to this group live in the Himalayas and are mainly divided into two groups: (a) Tibetan-Burmese and (b) Siamese-Chinese. This division is shown in the graph below.¹¹



4. Into-Aryan language group –

Of this group live in different parts of India. Although they possess the same typical features like complexion, nose, lips, shape of head – somehow or other they have forgotten their mother tongue. They speak in the colloquial, Indo-Aryan language or 'Sadri'. According to Griecca, Sandri is a branch of Bhojpard chik, Bayaik, Bedia, Lohra, and Kharwas etc. are among the Indo-Aryan language group.

Now if we divide the 38 aboriginal tribes of West Bengal according to language, we get the following list.¹³

a) Austra-Asiatic language group:

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|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Asur | 9) Bhumij |
| 2. Kasmali | 10) Mahali |
| 3. Kisan | 11) Mahali |
| 4. Korwa | 12) Munda |
| 5. Kora | 13) Lodha, Kheria or Kharia |
| 6. Chero | 14) Savar |
| 7. Nagesia | 15) Santal |
| 8. Birhor | 16) Ho. |

b) The Dravidian language group :

1. Oraon
2. Khond
3. Gond
4. Mal Pahariya
5. Sauria Pahariya.

c) Tibetan-Chinese language group :

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Garo | 5. Mech |
| 2. Chakma | 6. Mru |
| 3. Bhutia | 7. Rabha |
| (O Kagate, Toto, Dukpa, Sherpa) | 8. Lepcha |
| 4. Magha | 9. Hajong. |

d) Indo-Aryan language group :

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Kharwar | 5. Birjla |
| 2. Gorait | 6. Bedia |
| 3. Chik Baraik | 7. Baiga |
| 4. Parhaiya | 8. Lohar Lohra. |

The plight of the aboriginals was not the same as it is today. They had sufficient wealth and real estate. Even reference of a few kings and zamindars can be found in old chronicles. It is known that, in the 14th century A.D., Syad Ibrahim Ali alias Malik Baya who was the commander of Muhammad Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, invaded the fort of Champa. The owner of that fort, a Santal king committed suicide along with his whole family and Malik Baya took the possession in 1340 A.D.¹⁴

E.T. Dalton writes about this incident: I am unable to identify the Ahiri-Pipri, but Khairagarh and Chai Champa one in the Hazaribagh or Ramgarh district, and to Chai-Champa remote Santals, as well as these in this districts frequently allude. At Chai there is an old fort, the walls of which of earth and stones. Enclose a space about five acres of land. The tradition about it is that it was the abode of Jangra, a Santal Raja, who destroyed himself and his family on hearing of the approach of Muhammadan army under General Syed Ibrahim Ali alias Malik Baya. A Muhammadan Officer named Hazrat Fateh Khan Duala was placed in charge of the fort, and on his dying there, a place of worship or 'Dorga' was erected near his grave. There is another fort at Mangarb, four miles from Chai, which is also assigned by tradition to a Santal called Man Singh. He abandoned his fort on the approach of the Mohammedans. At and about Cbai it is said that there were formerly six Santal chiefs, three in Bihar and three in the Hazaribagh district".¹⁵

Before the British rule these people were on the whole self reliant. They never begged, "Neither had much demand. They lived by farming and collecting forest products. They perfected Barter system rather than money transaction. The only things for which they had to depend on the outer world were salt and clothing. Some people earned their livelihood by making bamboo hampers palm leaf mats and thicbark lassos. However the British administrators made a lot of research on the life and livelihood of the aboriginals, but thought very little for their social and economic upliftment.¹⁶ On the contrary, they imposed the burden of tax and employed the zamindars and mahajans to exploit them. Whenever they protested

they were repressed brutally. The Chuar mutiny of 1770 and 1779, the Khasi mutiny of 1783, the Jath mutiny of 1809, the Bhil mutiny of 1919, the Kol mutini of 1831-32, the Bhumij mutiny of 1932, the Naga mutiny of 1839m the Khond mutiny of 1846, the Santal mutiny of 1855 and the Munda mutiny of 1895 beat the historical witness of this torture. As a result of these outbreaks, the British Government adopted a new policy about the aboriginals and kept them aloof from the greater Indian society. There is no doubt that it was this "divide and rule" policy of the British that the aboriginal communities were deprived of all the benefits of the development projects. Although the administrators did not do anything for the social and economic prosperity of these people, they did one thing for their mental reformation.¹⁷ They allowed the Missionaries to work freely in the aboriginal infested areas. This had both good and bad effects. Three among the few Protestant Christian Missions who worked in West Bengal are worth mentioning.¹⁸

1. American Baptist Mission.
2. Methodist Missionary Society.
3. Church Missionary Society.

Apart from these Roman Catholic Mission also worked in some areas.

American Baptist Mission started working among the Santals and Koros of Midnapur.

The Missionaries tried to spread education along with preaching Christianity. Arrangements were made to set up a High School for Santal boys and M.E. School for girls and a training centre for carpentry and

weaving in Bhimpur village in Midnapur. Only in this school of West Bengal, Santali was regularly taught and students could appear in the Matriculation Examination of the Calcutta University with this language. Many students came to study in this school from Midnapur, Bankura and even Singbhum districts of Bihar.¹⁹

The Methodist Missionary Society started their work in Bankura in 1870. The Mission set up a hospital in Sarenga for the benefit of the Santals and other Scheduled Tribes. This hospital was provided with all types of facilities for the convenience of the Adivasi patients. The Church Missionary Society worked among the Adivasis of North Bengal.²⁰

The Roman Catholic Mission worked among the Adivasis of Keshiari Block of Midnapur, Kalna Block of Burdwan, Habibpur and Gajol Block of Malda.

It is true that these Missionary organisations served the Adivasis in many ways, but at the same time it cannot be denied that their society and culture were harmed to a great extent due to this missionary influence. In some areas a wall of demarcation between Christians and non-Christians were made and they have lost confidence in themselves.²¹

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