

Tribes of India: India's overall Demographic Scene and Demographic Features in Tribal Societies

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Review Article

Volume 2 Issue 2

Received Date: July 05, 2019

Published Date: August 06, 2019

DOI: 10.23880/aeoaj-16000123

Abstract

The idea of "tribes" is particularly complex in the Indian subcontinent, where indigenous/primitive inhabitants were neither eliminated, nor quite absorbed, by the rising civilization in the course of history.

It is plain enough that the demography of tribal people cannot loom large in India's overall demographic scene (the former's relative size being only a little more than 8%). But, as we will see, demographic features in tribal societies have often been distinct and/or rather distinguished both in historical and comparative perspectives. In particular, the chief object of the present paper is to evaluate the overall demographic features and their common sociocultural underpinnings in the aggregate tribal population, in comparison, particularly, with their closest counterparts, namely, the lower caste (officially known as scheduled caste (SC)) people and others. Apart from illuminating useful insights into the nature and strength of the well-known connection between sociocultural milieus and demographic behaviour, this paper throws fresh light on the Indian notion of the "tribe" and its comparative position vis-à-vis the mainstream since the late 19th century, especially in the contemporary context of development and globalization.

Keywords: Tribes; Demographic Patterns; Socio-Economic; Sociocultural Characteristics

Introduction

The notion/identity of "tribes" is particularly complex in the Indian subcontinent, where indigenous/primitive inhabitants were neither eliminated, nor quite absorbed, by the rising civilization in the course of history. For example, although India's tribes have been studied intensively (and extensively) for many decades, both before and after independence, they appear as obscure as ever [1]. While they have often been glorified (particularly by older-generation anthropologists), their popular image has remained rather vague, indifferent, and indeed, full of misconceptions and folklore. Despite

substantial accumulation of literature (official and non-official alike) on the (relative) vulnerability of tribes, despite "countless" laws enacted for protecting their rights, and despite about half the country's mineral and forest resources belonging to "tribal areas", they remain the "most underdeveloped community" [2]. All this clearly reflects a resolute ambivalence on the part of the Indian state towards tribes (who fetch a numerically insignificant fraction of electoral support).

It is plain enough that the demography of tribal people cannot loom large in India's overall demographic scene (the former's relative size being only a little more than

8%). But, as we will see, demographic features in tribal societies have often been distinct and/or rather distinguished both in historical and comparative perspectives. In particular, the chief object of the present paper is to evaluate the overall demographic features and their common sociocultural underpinnings in the aggregate tribal population, in comparison, particularly, with their closest counterparts, namely, the lower caste (officially known as scheduled caste (SC)) people and others. Apart from illuminating useful insights into the nature and strength of the well known connection between sociocultural milieus and demographic behaviour, this paper throws fresh light on the Indian notion of the “tribe” and its comparative position vis-à-vis the mainstream since the late 19th century, especially in the contemporary context of development and globalization.

For example, India’s large-scale development initiatives in the post-independence period are often being seen by scholars to have induced a shifting orientation in tribal studies, namely, from a focus on tribes as communities to a view of them as subjects of modernization and development or as their victims [3].

Our present aggregative approach, of course, departs from anthropologists’ (and probably of many others) overriding perception that a study/analysis of aggregate tribal people can hardly make sense. However, the latter view is not always unquestionable. First, this (anthropological) perspective though it has for long dominated India’s tribal discourse, has arguably failed to provide cohesive and consistent statements on the predicaments of tribal people as a whole and on their effective remedies. As the report of an Advisory Committee on the Revision of the lists of SCs and scheduled tribes (STs) had observed in 1965,

...it would be in the best interest of these communities if they are taken out from the list of scheduled castes and tribes and are treated exclusively as a distinctive group, with development schemes specially designed to suit their dominant characteristics

Second, since diversities – sociocultural, environmental, and geophysical – are as much (or at least no less) germane to the tribal and non-tribal populations alike, it is pertinent to wonder as to why only tribal diversity, rather than commonality, should deserve academic priority and attention. If aggregate (or average) tribal patterns – say, demographic and sociocultural – are distinct from those of their non-tribal counterparts, the former could well be treated as one entity vis-à-vis the latter. Thus, while not denying the value of

anthropological methods and micro-level studies, we adopt here an aggregative approach which we believe to be useful to policy formulation for India’s overall tribal people.

Tribes in the Indian Censuses

India is one of very few non-western countries for which detailed decennial census information is available since as back as the 1870s. The census reports and statistical tables have since been presenting demographic information separately for the tribal population and often for many individual tribes. However, the census information, like most other large-scale data, is not perfect, calling for appropriate caution in drawing conclusions. In examining the long-term trends, the question of comparability of data from one census to other could be of key importance, while in a comparative demographic analysis of two sub-populations for a single census year the question of relative accuracy and coverage would be of greater significance. In the censuses of British India (except in 1941), religion was one prominent criterion for classification of the country’s population, with tribes being categorized as those practicing hundreds of different “primitive” religions. In fact, they used to be classified as “animists” until the 1931 Census, in which they were enumerated under the heading “tribal religion”. Thus, up to 1941, the use of religious category in the census enumeration enabled the authorities to bypass many complex issues – anthropological, sociological and historical – involved in the notion and/or identity of diverse tribes across the country.

It was only in 1941 that the tribals were defined, for the first time in the history of the Indian census, not in terms of their religion or faith, but their “origin”. In fact, this major shift in the criterion of enumeration brought in a serious difficulty of comparability between 1941 and the preceding census enumerations [4]. Around the time of India’s independence, a serious rethinking on the notion of the tribe or tribal identity was initiated by political leaders who wanted tribal and other backward sections to bring gradually through “affection”, “friendliness” and some special protections and provisions to the mainstream levels.

The Constitution of India empowered the president to declare any tribal community or part thereof as a “scheduled tribe” eligible for those special provisions and benefits. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1950, the president promulgated in the same year a list of STs and scheduled areas, which was based, in a large measure,

on the list of backward tribes promulgated in 1936 by the British colonial administration. At the first census of independent India in 1951, the number of scheduled tribal communities or part thereof was 212, with specific areas being earmarked for each. The Constitution provisions, thus, “sealed the boundaries between tribe and non-tribe” and gave to the tribal identity “a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past” [5]. Thus, since the 1950s, there emerged not only a definite tribal identity with legal sanction, but also a distinct political interest forging that identity.

Without laying down specific criteria for scheduling a tribe, the Constitution has empowered the president of the country to appoint a backward classes commission, with three major tasks: to evaluate conditions of socially backward classes; recommend policy for amelioration of their hardships and deprivations; and re-examine the existing list of STs for suggesting its revision, if necessary.

The first such backward classes commission was appointed in 1953, which came up with a recommendation for declaring some additional communities as scheduled. Accordingly, a modified (and enlarged) list of STs was notified by the president in 1956, and the list was published under SCs and STs (Modification) Order, 1956. Consequently, by the 1961 Census, the number of STs rose to 427 (which was an increase by more than twice the number at the 1951 Census), and to 432 by the Census of 1971.

Owing to various problems and complaints, the Removal of Area Restrictions (Amendment) Act of 1976 was passed to remove the area restriction on tribal identity, and, henceforth, the list of STs was made applicable to all areas in a state. Consequently, STs began to mean, for all practical purposes, “tribal population” of the country. Difficulties, of course, remained due, inter alia, to “the varying definition of a tribe, by changes to the list of officially recognised tribes, by qualitative deficiencies in demographic data, administrative changes to India’s regions and by the reclassification of tribes as castes” [6]. But these possible defects of census data have not usually been so serious as to obliterate the discernible distinctions in demographic features and parameters between the tribal and mainstream populations.

The preparation of schedules for tribal and lower caste people had occurred simultaneously. Although there might have been some anomalies in the official recording of these two social identities, this does not preclude the possibility of fruitful and imaginative use of census information (at least) for some specific purposes. In fact,

census data do often depict contrasting demographic patterns/outcomes between these two social groups. Unsurprisingly, these two groups do not seem historically to have been much different in terms of economic levels and footings, but they have been pretty distinct socio culturally. Therefore, it should be illuminating if tribal demographic patterns and trends are examined in comparison with those of the SC population.

Result

Understanding tribes in the light of their demographic trends, patterns, and outcomes should provide useful insights into the evolution of the notion of tribes and their relative social position.

Demographic Patterns and Trends of Indian Tribes

- a. Includes 23,31,332 persons in North-West Frontier Province not enumerated by religion, but believed to be Muslim.
- b. In view of a change in classification in the 1941 Census, this is an estimate – made for the purpose of achieving comparability with the figures of tribal population identified as Animists till 1931 or as people practising tribal religion in 1931 Census – of tribal population in 1941, derived after adjustments to the enumerated population of “tribal origin”. See Davis [4], Appendix J for adjustments and assumptions involved in obtaining this estimate.
- c. Excludes Assam. The decadal growth rate during 1971-81 has been calculated by excluding the population of Assam.
- d. Excludes Jammu and Kashmir. The decadal growth rate during 1981-91 has been calculated excluding population of both Assam and Jammu and Kashmir.

See note 1 below; + for India and Pakistan together [7], @ This has been calculated on the basis of revised estimate of tribal population for 1971 (which is 3,94,89,232 excluding Assam) after taking account of the abolition of hitherto imposed area restriction for most tribes by an act of Parliament in 1976, which resulted in larger population of several tribes in many states according to 1971 Census than were actually enumerated (see Sinha [8]. In fact, the office of the registrar general worked the revised population of tribals for states where the revision was necessary (see commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled and also [9].

1. In 1951 Census the tribal population was for the first time enumerated according to a statutory list of scheduled tribes notified by the president under Article

342 of the Constitution, which was enlarged through modification as per order in 1956. According to the 1956 Modification order the tribal population for the 1951 Census was revised upward as being 2, 25, 11, 584, with the revised percentage rising to 6.23. Since tribal population in 1961 was enumerated according to the 1956 Modification list of scheduled tribes, the decadal growth rate of tribal population during 1951-61 has been calculated on the basis of this revised tribal population for 1951.

Source: For the British India figures, Davis [4] and Mamoria [10], p 26 For post-independence period, see Census Reports, Nag [11].

We now examine the broad features of long-term growth of the tribal population since the late 19th century, in comparison with the total population (Table 1). Except for three decades, namely, 1891-1901, 1911-21 and 1921-31, the aggregate tribal population did register increases. For example, during 1881-91, the enumerated total population increased by about 12%, while the increase recorded for the tribal population was three and half times larger. This could be due to improvements in enumeration coverage of tribal peoples in remote and isolated terrains. However, over the following decade of 1891-1901, the tribal population had experienced a substantial decline in its absolute number vis-à-vis an increase in the total population. This (arguably) reflects a greater mortality toll among the former in the two large-scale famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900. But in the following decade, 1901-11, the enumerated tribal population had increased much faster than the general population. This could be due to a lessened severity of famines in terms of frequency, scale and coverage, and also (presumably) due to quicker recovery in the post-famine years (e g, through higher than normal levels of fertility) of the tribal population, which had suffered a greater (proportionate) population loss in the preceding major famines

Growth of total population was negligible during 1911-21 within which occurred the great influenza pandemic of 1918, causing a heavy toll of human lives including even considerable depopulation among tribals. Again, during 1921-31, Indian tribes appear to have experienced a decline in aggregate population, while there had been an increase in the total population. This differential seems attributable to the heightened politics over religious divisions around the 1931 Census, with, for example, an active political pressure mounting on the authorities to return "everyone of doubtful status as Hindu" [4].

Furthermore, the shift of criterion from religious affiliation to "tribal origin" as the basis of tribal enumeration in the Census 1941 was (at least partly) responsible for a record of their comparatively slower increase in 1931-41 (Table 1). Except for the dramatic effects of famines and epidemics, the enumerated tribal population up to 1921 was growing at rates no less (or may, indeed, be sometimes higher) than those for the total population. The somewhat sluggish recorded increases of the tribal population over the three decades preceding independence could partly be an artifact of social and political turmoil on religious lines.

Another noteworthy feature of pre-independence tribal population growth is the somewhat constancy of its proportion to the total since the late 19th century, as against secular declines in the proportion of the Hindus. While the former ranged between 2.26% and 3.26% during 1881-1941, the latter dropped from 75.1% to 69.5% [4]. This differential, according to Kingsley Davis, was due to the higher fertility of tribal population than that of the Hindus. But there could be other possibilities as well. For example, as we argue later, this constancy of the tribal proportion could have resulted from its relatively lower mortality, not from higher fertility vis-à-vis those of the Hindu population.

In the first census of independent India in 1951, the enumerated number of tribal people turned out to be more than twice its size in the preceding census, despite the Partition of India in 1947. This might have been partly because the regions (e g, north-western parts and eastern Bengal) that were carved out from erstwhile India were historically of low tribal concentration. However, this can hardly be a full explanation, especially when total population of the country declined by about 7% in 1941-51. The clue lies in the fact that enumeration of tribal and lower caste people was made for the first time on the basis of respective statutory schedules prepared and approved by the government.

Many persons not considered as "tribals" on the criterion of their religious affiliation and/or otherwise before independence, could find themselves so identified in the 1951 Census. Thus, with the decadal growth of enumerated tribal population being higher than that of the total population in the post-independence period, the former's proportion rose from 5% in 1951 to more than 8% in 2001 (Table 1). Note, however, that the gap in these two recorded growth rates has been the highest during the 1951-61 decade, and it narrowed down over the following decades (perhaps with the exception for the

1971-81 decade). This relative inflation of ST population in the post-independence period does partly reflect expansion of ST list. As Beteille [5] observes, “paradoxically, the number of communities deemed to be tribes has increased with the modernization of India between 1950 and 1976”.

However fairly rapid enlargement of the list of STs, especially up to the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as the removal of the area restriction in 1976, account for the extent of the recorded surges in tribal population that took place merely through reclassification, and, hence, of redistribution of the existing population. But there is the fairly strong evidence suggesting a higher real natural growth of the tribal than that of the total population. While the estimated growth of the “matched populations of STs” between 1961 and 1971 turned out to be only about 1% point lower (25.3%) than that (26.2%) based on unadjusted figures, the former happened to be 1% point higher than that of the total population, affirming a higher natural growth rate among tribes vis-à-vis general population in the post-independence period [8].

The relatively high growth of tribal population in the newly independent country could be related to the new development and modernization initiatives, which via changes in lifestyles, customs, values, and some material improvements with little prevalence of modern contraception, could induce rises in fertility (so-called “pre-transition rise of fertility”, i e, rises of fertility just prior to the beginning of its secular decline). In fact, such pre-transition fertility rise has probably been relatively delayed, prolonged, and pronounced among the ST population vis-à-vis SCs, as the former have arguably lagged the latter in the processes of modernization/Sanskritization.

What emerges, on the whole (ignoring periods of dramatic losses of population during famines, epidemics and the like), is a picture of the tribal population having

grown – much like the general population – at very moderate rates during pre-independence decades, but at much higher rates, thereafter partly because of inclusion of new tribal identities and partly because of late occurrence of their “pre-transition rise” of fertility. However, like total population, the indication of the onset of a declining trend in the growth of tribal population in more recent decades seems well discernible.

A broad regional pattern of India’s tribal population – namely, tribes being concentrated (in descending order) in central, eastern (including north-eastern) and western regions (these together constituting about 90% of total tribal population) – has remained largely unchanged.

However, there has been a distinct decline of tribal share of eastern states (particularly Bihar and Orissa) in the post-independence period. Notwithstanding possible enumeration biases (e g, over enumeration of tribals in southern and western regions most prominently up to 1981), the large part of the explanation for the changing pattern of regional composition of the tribal population lies in the interstate differences in real demographic processes, e g, birth, death rates and their trends, patterns of spatial mobility and movements of tribal people [12].

** [13]; the percentage shares have been calculated by the present author on the total tribal population of India (exclusive of Assam). AP - Andhra Pradesh; MP - Madhya Pradesh; WB - West Bengal.

@ Borokacharis; # These are 1941 Census enumerations of specific tribes on the criterion of “tribal origin” (rather than tribal religion used in 1931 and before). Therefore, the respective shares of tribal groups have been calculated on total enumerated tribal population of 25, 441,548, which is much larger than adjusted figure of 87,91,354 as presented in Table 1.

Year	Total Population	Tribal Population		Decadal Growth Rate (%)		Sex-Ratio (Female Per 1,000 Males)	
		No.	%	Total	Tribal	Total	Tribal
1881	25,01,55,050	64,26,511	2.6	-	-	954	-
1891	27,95,75,324	91,12,018	3.3	11.76	41.79	958	992
1901	28,38,67,584	81,84,758	2.9	1.54	-10.2	972	1,021
1911	30,30,04,354	95,93,695	3.2	6.74	17.21	964	1,016
1921	30,57,26,528	90,72,024	3	0.89	-7.2	955	996
1931	33,76,75,361	76,29,959	2.5	10.45	-15.9	950	1,009
1941	38,89,97,955 ^(a)	87,91,354 ^(b)	2.3	15.2	6.17	945	985
Independent India							
1951*	36,10,88,090	1,91,11,498	5.3	-	-	946	1,021
1961	43,92,34,771	3,01,30,184		23.1	33.84*	941	987

1971	54,81,59,652	3,80,15,162	6.9	24.8	26.17	930	982
1981 ^(c)	66,52,87,849	5,16,28,638	7.8	24.69	30.6@	934	983
1991 ^(d)	83,85,83,988	6,77,58,380	8.1	23.79	25.68	927	972
2001	1,02,86,10,328	8,43,26,240	8.2	22.7	24.5	933	977

Table 1: Long-Term Trends in Population and Its Growth, and Sex-Ratio, Total and Tribal Populations, India (1881-2001).

Source: Roy Burman [13]; Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission, Vol 1, 1960-1961, p 7; Sinha [8].

Despite the number of STs having already exceeded 500, it is only a few major tribal groups that constitute a large bulk of the aggregate tribal population of the country. For example, as Table 2 shows, about nine major tribal groups constitute nearly half of country's total tribal population, and they are concentrated mostly in the central, western and eastern parts. The tribe-composition

has remained broadly unaltered over the post-independence period, not withstanding proliferation of new tribal subgroups. For example, relative shares of Bhil and Gond populations have risen, admittedly marginally, with a meager reduction in the share of Munda population (Table 2).

Tribe	Regions of Habitation	Population				Average Annual Growth Rate (%)		
		1941#	1961	1971	1981**	1941-61	1961-71	1971-81
		No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)			
Bhil	Gujarat, MP and Rajasthan	23,30,270 (9.2)	38,36,308 (12.8)	51,82,625 (13.6)	73,92,983 (14.3)	3.23	3.51	4.26
Gond	MP, Orissa, AP and Maharashtra	32,01,004 (12.6)	39,91,767 (13.4)	48,09,165 (12.7)	73,87,376 (14.3)	1.24	2.05	5.36
Santal	Bihar, Orissa, WB and Tripura	27,32,266 (10.7)	31,54,107 (10.5)	36,33,459 (9.6)	42,60,842 (8.3)	0.77	1.52	1.73
Oraon	Bihar, MP, Orissa and WB	11,22,926 (4.4)	14,47,429 (4.8)	17,06,091 (4.5)	18,65,779 (3.6)	1.44	1.8	0.94
Mina	Rajasthan	-	11,55,916 (3.9)	15,33,513 (4.0)	20,86,692 (4.0)	-	3.27	3.61
Munda	Bihar, Orissa, WB, MP	7,06,869 (2.8)	10,19,098 (3.4)	11,63,338 (4.0)	14,22,830 (2.8)	2.21	1.42	2.23
Khond	AP, Orissa	7,44,904 (2.9)	8,45,981 (2.8)	9,11,835 (2.4)		0.68	0.78	
Boro @	Assam, WB, Tripura	594979 -2.3	3,51,583			-2.05		
Varli			3,74,184					

Table 2: Growth of Population and Growth of Numerically Large Tribes, India (1941-91).

There are quite a few tribal groups – each constituting (e.g., as per 1971 Census count) slightly more than 1% of total tribal population, namely, Ho (1.42%) in eastern India, Naga (1.23%) in north-eastern states [8]. Apart from them, there are numerous smaller tribal groups dispersed across the country. In fact, there are some “small” and so-called primitive tribes of which enumerated populations range from as low as 20. Many of such small tribes are, indeed, on their way towards extinction. However, the phenomenon of so-called “vanishing” tribes, if at all, is extremely localised, and

indeed, specific to very small groups situated in very special circumstances. These most vulnerable tribal groups, who currently number around 75, constituting nearly 2% of total tribal population, include Onges, Shompens, the Greater Andamanese, Rajjis Didayis, Hill Korwas and Bondas. An acute food deprivation and extreme vulnerability to death and disease have generally been held responsible for diminution of some small tribal groups in specific locations [14].

The “vanishing tribes” phenomenon, of course, deserves an attention and an effective public action in its own right, but it is important to keep in mind that the former does not represent the aggregate tribal situation in India. In fact, the major tribal groups (except some small vanishing ones) are not experiencing a uniform positive rate of population growth. While Bhil and Gond – dominant central and western tribes – have had accelerating population growth since the early 1960s, Santals, Mina and Munda – mostly eastern tribes – have fared far less in terms of population increase (Table 2). For example, the populations of Katkari, an originally nomadic tribe of Konkan region of Maharashtra, have been almost stationary during 1961-71 in the face of nearly 2.3% average annual growth rate of aggregate tribal population in the state [15]. While this could well be related to acute material deprivation, other possibilities (e.g., effect of removal of area restriction) cannot be ruled out. For example, among the major tribes of central and western states (e.g., Bhil, Gond, Mina), growth of population has been above the national average and even accelerated in the post-independence period, at least up to the 1980s. This rapid growth of tribal population, especially over several decades since independence, seems to have caused *inter alia* by a relatively late occurrence of modern improvements in mortality of tribal population, and (somewhat related) by “pre-transition fertility rises” consequent upon generally sluggish pace of modernization across tribal communities.

In contrast, the major tribes of eastern India (e.g., Santal, Orao, Munda, Khond) have registered much smaller population increase vis-à-vis both general population in this region and tribes of western and central India. A relatively larger under enumeration of tribal people in this region, especially in the late 1970s, could be a factor, since official recognition of tribal identity on the basis of “area restrictions” continued here for some time even after latter’s formal repeal in 1976 [13]. But this cannot constitute a complete explanation. A relative mortality disadvantage and comparatively low fertility among these tribes (vis-à-vis those of central and western India) are also likely to have been contributors – especially over the recent past. Furthermore, specific historical factors might have made major East Indian tribes relatively prone to long distance migration and movement [14,16].

In sum: three major tribal groups, namely, Bhil, Santal, Gond constitute nearly 40% of the country’s total tribal population, and this numeric dominance of just a few major tribes amidst hundreds of tiny groups and subgroups has been continuing for a long time past,

leaving aggregative analysis of India’s tribal population useful and credible.

Perhaps the most glaring difference between tribal and general populations lies in the sex ratio, i.e., female-male ratio (FMR hereafter) (Table 1). In distinct contrast to India’s overall FMR being unfavourable to females, it has been relatively balanced among tribes.

In fact, females outnumber males in the entire western world and in many developing countries outside Asia and North Africa. Such excess female scenario derives both from females’ biological edge over males in natural survival chances as well as from their relative mortality advantage in wars, accidents and lifestyles. Thus, a huge deficiency of females, as indicated by low FMR in general population, reflects adverse social influences outweighing females’ intrinsic (biological) advantage in survival.

There have been several attempts at estimating what Amartya Sen famously coined “missing women” in countries with lower than a “benchmark” FMR, which generally obtains in the absence of anti-female social environment. The estimated figure of about 37 million missing women in India, obtainable from the use of sub-Saharan FMR of 1.022 as a benchmark, provides a broad sense of how many more females could remain alive if anti-female social environment were absent.

A long-term deteriorating trend in FMR among India’s general population since the early 20th century (Table 1) has been a source of concern in academic and official circles alike. After several decades of discussions and research, a few stark facts have emerged almost indisputably in the Indian context:

- a. that low overall FMR in total population is largely related to a female mortality disadvantage (vis-à-vis males), especially in infancy and young childhood;
- b. that this relative female disadvantage is a manifestation of familial discrimination and neglect mostly against girls in respect of distribution of resources, especially medical attention and healthcare;
- c. apart from worsening relative share of females in the distribution of benefits of modern improvements in health and medical facilities, there are indications of intensification -along with overall development and a large-scale transition to lower fertility regime-of anti-female biases, often more selectively against higher parity daughters born already or abortion of high parity female foetus.

Finally, the above anti-female outcomes are generally traced to a pervasive culture of “son preference” or a gender bias (i.e., preference for sons over daughters), which is a prominent expression of fundamental Asian cultural, and patriarchal values in which female status and autonomy is relatively low.

Against these disquieting (and even perhaps growing) imbalances in FMR of India’s general population, the tribal record of a more balanced sex-ratio is of considerable interest (Table 1). This implies, following our foregoing discussion, a much lesser anti-female discrimination (especially, against female infants and children) in tribal societies vis-à-vis those – an implication which is often supported by related research and evidence [17]. Besides, there exists a substantial anthropological evidence elucidating relatively little (or perhaps almost total absence of gender bias in traditional tribal society and culture. In this context, a 10-point drop of tribal FMR from 983 to 972 during 1981-91 decade is particularly noteworthy, pointing to the plausibility of tribal trend in the direction of the mainstream pattern of growing deficit of females.

With all this as background, we now turn to a comparative evaluation of India’s aggregate tribes vis-à-vis non-tribal groups in terms of broad socio-economic and sociocultural indicators as well as some key demographic outcomes and behaviour over a long time span.

Socio-Economic Characteristics and Sociocultural Outcomes/Behaviour and Demographic

@ Estimated by indirect methods by the author [12]; # Hindu; \$ number of children surviving per 1,000 born to families with completed fertility in 1921;

^ Central Provinces/Berar; * 1911-21; € 1982; α early 1980s; β Hindu Non-ST/SC; ψ 1978; £ all; a 2008; CBR= crude birth rate per 1,000; IMR= Infant Mortality Rate per 1,000 births; ** 1987-88; Literacy rate relates to age 7+; Unmarried women relates to age 50+;

Sources: World Facts Book; Census of India 2001, Marital Status and Age at Marriage; Census of India 2001, Social and Cultural, SC and ST, Government of India 2008. New Delhi NSS 55th Round, July-June 2004-05; NSS 59th Round, January-December 2003; www.indiastat.com/data/; GOI, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India 2008; Central Statistical Organisation, Statistical Abstract of India 2005-2006; CSO 2006, Selected Socio-economic Statistics of India, 2006, Government of India, New Delhi; Census of India 2001, Marital Status and Age at Marriage, An Analysis of 2001 Census Data; Census of India 2001, Social and Cultural, SC and ST; Sundaram K and Tendulkar SD, “Poverty among Social and Economic Groups in India in the 1990s”, Working Paper 118, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics; International Institute for Population Sciences, National Family Health Survey, 1992-93, 1998-99; Thorat [18]; Das [19].

While a substantial body of empirical and ethnographical literature on the sociocultural features of India’s diverse tribal peoples exists, the task of collating and stylising the former’s influences on demographic outcomes has relatively rarely been taken up. In this context, Table 3 presents summary information on socio-economic, sociocultural, demographic features separately for STs, SCs and others at all-India level at four points of time spanning over a century since the early 1900s.

Socio-economic indicators	Scheduled Tribes				Scheduled Castes				Other			
	Early (1901-21)	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s	Early (1901-21)	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s	Early (1901-21)	Early 1970s	Early 1990s	Early 2000s
% share in population (rural) (NSS)	--	9.2α	10.8	10.6	--	16.8α	21.1	20.9	--		55.8β	54.8
% share in land (NSS) (rural)	--	10.1α	11.7	11.15	--	7.9α	10.3	9.04	--	82.0α	78	79.8
Area owned per household (ha) (rural)	--	--	1.06	0.767	--	--	0.5	0.304	--	--	1.01	1.7
% of farm labourers to total main workers	--	33	32.7	28.5	--	51.8	49.1	39.2	2	20	20	31.3
% of landless households	--	17.1α	13.3	7.2	--	12.6α	20.4	10	--	10.2α	11.2	
Per capita consumption	--	87.2α	123.0**	857.5	--	94.3α	133.1**	758.4	--	129.0α	169.2**	2177

expenditure (rural) (Rs)												
% below poverty line (rural)	--	67.2 α	50.2	44.7	--	61.6 α	48.3	37.1	--	43.1 α	30	21.2
(% share to total rural poor)			[10.8]	[16.9]			[27.7]	[27.7]			[44.7]	[41.5]
% literate (5+ years)	--	11.4	23.6	24.35	--	14.7	30.1	45.19	--	33.8	47.7	64.8 ϵ
Demographic Indicators												
TFR (average children born to women aged 40-49 years)	40@ (CBR)	4.1 ψ	3.6 [4.8]	3.1 [4.6]	--	4.8 ψ	3.9 [5.4]	2.9 [4.5]	50@ # (CBR)	4.5 ψ	3.3 [4.8]	2.5 [3.8]
Crude Death Rate	38.6@	14.7 α	9	--	--	16.2 α	13	--	44.5@#	11.7 α	11	6.4 ϵ ,a
IMR (survival ratio of children)\$	[790]\$^	101.1 α	88	43.8	--	126.5 α	84	50.7	[612]\$^#	99.2 α	74	39.2
Gender-relations/female autonomy Sex ratio (f/m)	1010	987	972	979	--	935	922	936	960*#	930 ϵ	927 ϵ	933 ϵ
Female Age at marriage (years)	17	16.4	17.1	18.4	--	14.9	16.1	17.6	13.4#	15.4 ϵ	17.4 ϵ	18.3 ϵ
Number unmarried per 1,000 women aged 40-49	23.1*	--	--	1.4	--	--	--	1.3	11.0*#	--	--	1.6 ϵ

Table 3: Long-term Trends in Select Socio-economic, Demographic and Sociocultural Indicators, Tribal and Non-Tribal Populations, India (Early 1900s to Early 2000s).

Unfortunately, information on socio-economic parameters separately for social groups is unavailable for the early 1900s. During the 1970s, the ST and SC groups do not appear to have been vastly different in terms of socio-economic footing defined by such indicators as income, consumption, asset possessions, poverty and occupation (Table 3). In fact, the ST population appear to own larger land per household than the SC counterparts do on the whole; while the proportion of total land owned by STs is pretty close to their relative share in total population, the share of land belonging to the SCs is far less than their relative population size. However, the more balanced land-man ratio among the overall tribes does not translate necessarily into their relatively higher agricultural incomes vis-à-vis SCs, since the former belong often to infertile, semi-arid, hilly, and forested terrains with extremely low agricultural productivity. Notably, per capita consumption expenditures of these two groups – though both being much lower than that of the non-SC/ST group – have not been hugely different. Likewise, the STs, according to large-scale sample survey results until recently (at least up to the mid-1970s), do not appear vastly more inflicted by income-poverty than the latter.

However, more lately, the pace of poverty reduction has been distinctly slower among the STs vis-à-vis SCs and others, reflecting a systematic (relative) disadvantage of tribal people in reaping the benefits from the poverty-

elevation programmes (e.g., employment guarantee schemes) [20,21].

More specifically, on the matter of two key human needs, namely, health and education, tribals appear clearly most deprived, with their extremely limited access to hospitals, medical doctors, medicines, and schools in comparison with even aggregate SC population (Table 3), [12].

What appear in this context rather striking is comparatively lower mortality levels among the tribes vis-à-vis Hindu mainstream population in the historical past (e.g., in the early 20th century) (Table 3). (As the quality of data as back as early 20th century is difficult to judge, appropriate caution is warranted in their interpretations.) However, the clue to the above historic differential, though it may sound strange in the present-day context, is not very far to seek. Several considerations and related historical evidence do lend support to the plausibility of a relative mortality and health advantage of the tribes (particularly in infancy and childhood ages) in the past. For example, prolonged breast-feeding and early start of food supplement for infants – both of which are now widely known to be favourable to infant and early childhood survival – have been prominent traditional practices in tribal communities.

A few other comparatively good features relating to infant and childcare practices in tribal cultures vis-à-vis mainstream (non-tribal) include the custom of holding infants and children vertically while awake and a close physical contact with mothers [22].

Furthermore, tribal females historically used to marry on average about four years later than the Hindu counterparts (Table 3). In fact, since child marriage is not practised in traditional tribal communities, this could have been a contributor to the comparative, mortality advantage of tribal infants, as infants of very young mothers run a higher risk of death. Comparatively greater autonomy and command of tribal females over intra-household resources might have contributed to a relatively better nutritional levels of tribal children vis-à-vis non-tribal counterparts historically.

Indeed, global evidence (especially prior to the age of large-scale use of antibodies and vaccines) shows that communities, which used to live in less crowded settlements and in great intimacy with natural environments (e.g., forests and hills), fared relatively better in mortality terms [23]. This might have been true of India's tribal people too in the past when their main settlements were not only in mountainous, hilly and forested tracts, but their secluded circumstances left them with lesser chances of exposure to contamination and disease transmission.

Similarly, plausible is their relative efficiency/advantage in using effective indigenous herbs/medicines for illness treatment (vis-à-vis non-tribal mainstream) in the pre-modern period of epidemiology and medical sciences. Besides, tribal people – partly because of these healthy aspects of their habitation, and partly due to their isolation from mainstream population – were perhaps less severely inflicted by epidemics. For example, the mortality effect of the great influenza pandemic of 1918 was found relatively less pronounced among pygmies and bushmen, as compared to other populations of the Kalahari desert [24]. The elevation of tribal mortality through contamination and disease transmission from the mainstream is often seen as one negative outcome of their growing contact, assimilation, and integration [10,25].

A few more reasons can be adduced for explaining relative mortality advantage of India's tribal population in the past. For example, the malaria, which had remained almost the largest killer, particularly prior to the Second World War, might have been somewhat less in tribal habitations in high altitude with relative dryness. Tribals'

greater dependence on spring waters, lesser density and crowding might have exerted mitigating influences on the incidence of diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases among them. Indeed, this historical evidence of relative mortality advantage of India's tribal infants and children tallies with what is often observed for foraging/tribal communities globally: "foraging societies experience relatively low levels of infant and child mortality due to synergistic effects of nutritional patterns yielding adequate growing and maintenance requirements and a relatively low incidence of infectious disease" [26]. In any case, it is of interest as to whether the historical superiority of some aspects of tribal demographic regime waned over time along with modernization, development, integration and cultural assimilation.

As was noted earlier, tribes as a whole – in consonance with many of their sociocultural features being akin to relatively balanced gender relations – have historically evinced far more balanced FMR vis-à-vis general population. This is further corroborated by the relevant information provided in Table 3. For instance, tribal females' nuptial features in the past – namely, marrying (relatively) late and only after "maturity" and mostly, on self-chosen basis, freedom to divorce, remarry and remain celibate – are reasonably reliable pointer to a relatively high status and autonomy that tribal women had enjoyed historically.

While this (with its implication for lower or negligible degree of "son preference") should have bred a motivation for comparatively low tribal fertility in the historical past, the latter could have been achieved, more directly, by tribals' several fertility-inhibiting sociocultural practices and taboos (such as relatively long durations of breastfeeding and child-spacing, postpartum sexual abstinence, indigenous methods of abortion and contraception).

While, as shown by recent research, a large chunk of historical/aboriginal populations across the globe has historically evolved various institutional and cultural mechanisms towards ensuring long-term counterbalancing (or so-called homeostatic) effects on "unlimited" childbearing and population size [27-29], their efficacy often called for comparatively high levels of female autonomy and gender equity. A more patriarchal society is widely known to be relatively favourable to high fertility, as women lack both autonomy in fertility decision/control and economic security. Women's disincentive/cost of frequent childbirth remains suppressed under stark patriarchy. Indeed, empirical studies often confirm an inverse relationship between

female autonomy and fertility – albeit mostly for mainstream society [30-33]. Although comparative studies of tribes are remarkably rare, there is distinct evidence – especially up to the early 1990s – suggesting lower level of overall fertility in aggregate ST population than that of the non-tribal counterparts, particularly SC people (Table 3).

However, the more recent scenario of the overall tribal demographic regime appears more complicated and varied owing to the mounting complexities of existence and related vulnerabilities. For example, a clear deceleration in fertility declines among tribes of late has made tribal fertility turn to be higher than even the SC's level (Table 3). This higher relative tribal fertility (vis-à-vis SC) might have resulted partly from fertility-enhancing effects of former's continuing reduction of sterility and venereal diseases, together with waning of traditional fertility-suppressing sociocultural practices and norms among tribal societies (e.g., reduction of breastfeeding duration, indigenous contraceptive methods and abstinence).

Moreover, what were of tribal societies akin, in some key respects, to the European marriage patterns, have been replaced – in varying pace across tribes and regions – by the traditional Hindu practices, namely, early female (or child) marriage, negotiated settlement with dowry payments (as opposed to the consensual choice/love between the partners). This so-called Sanskritization process might have, in many cases, pushed up tribal fertility or has impeded its pace of transition.

Apropos mortality, the past (relative) superiority of overall tribal population (particularly in childhood years) has been subsequently eroded, and indeed, even reversed in the recent past [12,34]. For example, as per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) – 3, 2005-06 information, childhood (one-four years) mortality turns out to be the highest among STs vis-à-vis SCs and others, although tribal relative advantage in infant mortality vis-à-vis SCs still shows up Das, et al. [19]. This reflects that insofar as the survival of an infant in a poor household can be ensured by somewhat healthy traditions of childcare practices and related cultural norms (as noted already; e.g., breastfeeding, weaning, solid food supplement), tribes still show remnants of their historic edge – albeit waning rather fast presently. As survival chances of children aged one-four years begin to shift increasingly on the availability of food, quality drinking water, medical facilities, such other material ingredients, the finding of highest child (one-four years) mortality among tribes reflects clearly latter's progressively acute

(relative) deprivation and vulnerability in livelihood and well-being, particularly in child nutrition and healthcare facilities. In some regions such as Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, STs appear to have experienced even increases in mortality levels of late. Indeed, tribes have been lagging behind SCs and others in terms of accessibility to contemporary mortality improvements triggered by expansion and advancement of health and medical infrastructure.

Although overall trend in mortality levels for ST population, like others, is one of decline, the pace of decline is slower, reflecting accentuation of relative deprivation in nutrition and healthcare facilities among tribes and their growing insecurity of livelihood caused by long-persistent encroachment, exploitation, and displacement in many tribal areas. This seems ironic in view of their relative mortality advantage in the past when adaptability with natural environment was comparatively important determinant of mortality.

No less ironically, tribal people have historically shown remarkable resilience in withstanding adversities meted out by dominant mainstream. For example, tribals in the face of distress, calamities and disruptions used to resort to migration relatively more readily than non-tribals. Notwithstanding movements and migrations being often a sheer survival response to distress, it is hard to deny the relative flexibility and liberalism of overall tribal sociocultural moorings, mores and organisations that facilitate this process. For instance, our case study of Santhals in parts of West Bengal illustrates a great potential of tribal seasonal mobility for improving their material and social standing, and thereby, achieving substantial advancement in demographic transition [12]. As a corollary, the more balanced gender relations, as is generally observed among tribal societies, do not seem to turn automatically conducive to fertility transition unless new ideas, attitudes, and information regarding fertility control and methods are percolated among them. This calls for the spread of female education and availability/campaign for voluntary/temporary methods of fertility control in tribal belts.

In this context, no less worrying is the contemporary forces towards a reversal of the traditionally (and historically) higher levels of gender equity and gender balance among the overall tribal society. In consonance with the recent declines of tribal FMR, there is mounting evidence of various disadvantages that the tribal females have been undergoing along with expansion of developmental activities and integration (via, for example, breakdown of traditional forest-based tribal economy,

environment, and shifting cultivation as well as via continuing or growing displacement and forced migration). Apart from the anti-female nature of changing production organisation in tribal economy and its resource base, direct evidence of female discrimination at the household level (e.g., sex-differential in mortality, nutritional status, and medical attention) seems to be already surfacing in tribal communities – of course, in varying pace across diverse locations [25,35]. This is clearly a manifestation of contemporary forces shaping the tribal trends of taking increasingly to the mainstream (Hindu) sociocultural traditions in the gender role/relations and sometimes to the conservative Christian influences [36]. A recent study, noting this “sharp” drop in tribal FMR, remarks, “the patriarchal norms of the higher castes, and Sanskritization and detribalisation are similarly assimilating tribal people into a national culture of discrimination against girls and women” [37]. Similarly, Berreman describes the effects of Sanskritization as being

...especially damaging to females because it encourages and enforces patriliney (in both descent and inheritance), patrilocality, early marriage and widow celibacy, limitation of divorce to male initiative, dowry marriage, preference for and favouring of male children, male ownership of virtually all property (especially, productive property), low priority to female education, literacy and even health, earning power restricted to males, isolation of social and physical mobility largely to males, and total economic, political and social dependence of females on males [38].

Thus, it is not that anti-female ramifications of the acculturation processes for tribal societies escaped attention of previous researchers, but our present aggregative analysis of demographic trends and features of overall tribes, in conjunction with their broad sociocultural underpinnings, has reaffirmed or rather established this connection on a firmer footing.

Interpretation and Discussion

In the studies of Indian tribes, there has been, for long, a remarkable lack of an interdisciplinary approach. For instance, a major chunk of Indian anthropology is devoted to meticulous classifications of virtually innumerable tribes of India – a tradition that was inaugurated by the British colonial rule and its retinue of civil servants [39,40]. Although the protracted debates and discussions on the notion/definition of tribe or tribal identity since the colonial times are now widely agreed to have been, on balance, “unproductive” and “sterile” [41-43], the British

census approach of adopting a working definition of tribes has been instrumental to the accumulation of massive demographic information handy for undertaking useful research towards a deeper understanding about them. This is vindicated both by the distinct overall tribal features of demography vis-à-vis the aggregate caste population, and also by the fact that a handful of major tribes constitute the bulk of the total tribal population of the country within relatively limited geographical areas of their habitation.

For example, the long-term trend of growth has not been remarkably different between tribal and general populations, except for periods of historically contingent events (e.g., famines and epidemics). Notwithstanding the phenomenon of a shrinking population (and impending extinction) of some select and small tribes, the overall picture of the tribal population is one of a steady increase. While the rising share of the tribal population in the first few decades after independence was partly due to expansion of the ST list, and, hence, was a result of redistribution of the enumerated people, some real demographic process, namely, a pretransition fertility rise cannot be ruled out. Tribal trends, like those of the general population, have shown the signs of a slowdown – albeit somewhat belated-of population growth and demographic transition.

What distinguishes the aggregate tribal population historically from the mainstream is its more balanced sex composition, and, by implication, a lesser degree of gender discrimination and/or a higher level of female status and autonomy, which are borne out amply by their traditional sociocultural features including female marriages only after the age of maturity, tolerance of widow remarriage, consensual/choice-based marriage without dowry, freedom to divorce – the features which are otherwise universally epitomised as “advanced” or “ideal” or more rhetorically speaking, “beautiful”. As C Farer-Haimendorf writes on the Many women in most civilised parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages [36,44].

As our foregoing analysis has shown, these beautiful sociocultural traditions of tribal peoples have produced admirable demographic behaviour and outcomes such as lower levels of fertility and infant and child mortality. (Notably enough, as late as 2005-06, as per the information of the NFHS-3 at the all-India level, the infant

mortality rate is were found to be lower among the STs as a whole (43.8 per 1,000 live births) as compared to that for the SCs (50.7.) From this standpoint, it is clearly ironic that tribes are typically branded as if they were not “civilised” or were outside civilisation. No less disturbing in this connection is the fact of a recent reversal towards growing imbalances of tribal sex-ratios, which reflect – in varying pace across regions – a longstanding trickling down of the stark gender inequities and related sociocultural practices and customs of the mainstream. This cannot but be unfortunate, and it thus calls for meticulous research and policy response. Indeed, it is the continuity of ingrained gender equity in India’s tribal culture that perhaps could come to soothe the lasting unease and enduring stigma of the country’s mainstream (dominant) sociocultural moorings, marked by stark gender biases, intense “son preference”, and their growing pervasiveness with rising levels of education and income. While India’s aggregate ST population still shows a total absence of sex-selective abortion vis-à-vis its incidence of about 10%-11% among the SCs and others [16,45], there would, perhaps tragically, be not very few for whom this tribal record would mean a mere reaffirmation of their “backwardness” in its catching up with our mainstream “civilisation”! [46-87].

Conclusions

It is plain enough that the demography of tribal people cannot loom large in India’s overall demographic scene (the former’s relative size being only a little more than 8%). But, as we will see, demographic features in tribal societies have often been distinct and/or rather distinguished both in historical and comparative perspectives. Bhil, Santal, Gond constitute nearly 40% of the country’s total tribal population, and this numeric dominance of just a few major tribes amidst hundreds of tiny groups and subgroups has been continuing for a long time past, leaving aggregative analysis of India’s tribal population useful and credible. A huge deficiency of females, as indicated by low FMR in general population, reflects adverse social influences outweighing females’ intrinsic (biological) advantage in survival. After several decades of discussions and research, a few stark demographic facts have emerged almost indisputably in the Indian context. Unfortunately, information on socio-economic parameters separately for social groups is unavailable for the early 1900s. The ST and SC groups do not appear to have been vastly different in terms of socio-economic footing defined by such indicators as income, consumption, asset possessions, poverty and occupation. Specifically, on the matter of health and education, tribals appear clearly most deprived, with their extremely

limited access to hospitals, medical doctors, medicines, and schools in comparison with even aggregate SC population. Infact, global evidence shows that communities, which used to live in less crowded settlements and in great intimacy with natural environments, fared relatively better in mortality terms. This might have been true of India’s tribal people too in the past when their main settlements were not only in mountainous, hilly and forested tracts, but their secluded circumstances left them with lesser chances of exposure to contamination and disease transmission. Although overall trend in mortality levels for ST population, like others, is one of decline, the pace of decline is slower, reflecting accentuation of relative deprivation in nutrition and healthcare facilities among tribes and their growing insecurity of livelihood caused by long-persistent encroachment, exploitation, and displacement in many tribal areas.

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