

Between Change and Continuity: Tribal Identity in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

This article reviews the existing literature on globalization and its effect on tribal identity and indigenous cultures. It looks at how economy globalisation, social organisation and cultural patterns constrain each other in the context of the simplified subject areas of anthropology, sociology and development studies, and how converging processes of cultural correspondence and technological transfer and development programmes initiated by States interact with such social organisation and cultural patterns among tribal people. Using a qualitative, literature-based methodological approach the study explores both theoretical understandings as well as empirical observations to outline dominant frames on cultural displacement and identity reformation. In a period of globalization and under the condition of the agency of the tribes, the study calls for culturally sensitive development policies that respect tribal agency and preserve indigenous knowledge systems along with the community-based cultural preservation practices.

Keywords: Globalization, Identity, Continuity, Indigeneity, Culture

Introduction

Globalization has led to changes in the nature of social, economic and cultural relations between all parts of the world and it has changed the depth of the relationship amongst localities as well as the global character of processes in production, distribution and communication as well as global regulation (Appadurai 32). The impact on indigenous communities whose identities lie in the land and kinsmen, and custom or community-based economies has been mixed, to say the least. In this field, academics have pointed out that the people of the tribes can't be considered just simply consumers of global change. Rather, the indigenous are people at the periphery of globalization, in a 'decentred space where forces to homogenize and to strengthen culture coexist'. This article adds its voice to this broader scholarly conversation, by describing and ordering some of the more recent and prominent

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discussions of tribal identity and cultural survival among the academic voices, in this last decades of globalization.

Much of literature helps to uncover the historical foundation of tribal culture and identity as a critical component in comprehending current and future change. Traditionally, tribal identity is founded upon the physiology, the local laws, folklore, folk belief system and the collective memory passed orally from generation to generation which is directly related to the specific ecosystem (Xaxa 41). Today the major life support structure and social order in tribal societies are the community (or absence of an institutionalized system) into which they are born. The rituals, festivals, folk arts and traditional systems of knowledge have not just been an expression of belief, but have also produced communities and kept alive the culture. These are historically entrenched aspects of the tribal life that are the context in which anthropologists research the effects of globalization—found in existing works.

Generally, in this sense globalization is viewed as a process that can change 'the material and symbolic foundations of tribal society'. Several studies have shown the effect of the larger markets, development processes, industrialisation, migration on their traditional “means of living” and their social relationships. There are different studies that show how their traditional – means of living” and social relationships have been transformed because of the presence of the larger markets, their development processes, industrialization and movement. However, as mass media and digital technology permeate the world system, and formal education has become universal, tribal societies are being more and more introduced to dominant cultures narrating narratives that ignore and/or actively commit tribal cultural perspectives on and modes of knowing. Globalization in this regard also goes in lock step with the loss of cultural resources, language and the fall of established institutions. According to Castells, global cultural transactions do favour hegemonic identities and their effect is that local cultures are structurally invisible in the networks of power that orchestrates the modern globe (Castells 214). Such processes are not described, however, in the narrative in a way that is uniform nor unidirectional.

Scholarly viewpoints are increasingly questioning that tribal affiliation is a static collective or is doomed to disintegrate in response to global forces. Rather, most studies emphasize the processes of negotiation, adaption, and reassertion by which tribal communities relate to global forces. Tribal communities are found to take in foreign values selectively, preserving their core cultural values, social norms, and traditional horizon of meaning. The past is often updated to meet pressing new demands, black culture artifacts are being reinstated and taking on a new meaning in other social and political contexts. Contrary to, or even in fighting against, disappearing of tradition under the influence of globalization trans-locates local cultures in new places for recreating and rethinking their self (Appadurai 47). It is also said in the academic literature that collective memory and historical consciousness are more crucial in emergence of cultural continuity despite mammoth changes may have occurred with respect to material aspects as well as social contexts.

Global Economic Integration and Tribal Livelihoods

The promotion of capitalist modes of production and globalization has also had their impact

on the traditional tribal economies which used to revolve around agriculture, sylviculture, pastoralism, and collectively-based property relation systems. There have almost always been components of the state (national and global) processes of assimilation led by extractive industrial settlements, colossal development project and markets linked agriculture with massive implications for tribal economies argue academicians. The literature explicates that mining, logging, and mega-infrastructure have consistently limited tribal access to territories and nature-dependent sources of livelihoods for economic self-sufficiency.

The issue of development-induced displacement is a major concern in the academia and tribal communities are almost always displaced from their natural habitats in the name of development without proper rehabilitation or permanent resettlement policies. Studies on development-induced displacement suggest that land alienation and overall ecological degradation is thought to erode the resource base of tribal economy which pushes it into a situation of greater economic vulnerability or such that they become pauperised by depending solely on wage employment. In such situations, displacement is not a matter of territory alone but of profound social and cultural disruption. Displacement in this case is not just of land but destruction of an entire socio-cultural world. Non-income earning activities are disrupted, social networks and kinship-based support systems including traditional practices of reciprocity mechanisms which have supported tribal life for centuries.

The study also considers how social relations are being restructured in indigenous society under the logic of global capitalism. The shift from the collective mode of production to wage labour is seen as both a process and effect of social differentiation and erosion of traditional structures (Xaxa 84). Growing emigration to urban and industrial centres, due to diminishing local opportunities also change families' structures and intergenerational dynamics which generates the erosion of mutual aid concealed in kinship exchange. At the same time, some literature recognises that being integrated in broader markets may create modest educational and employment opportunities, as access to state-based welfare is partial and situational.

In general, the literature discussed in this section characterizes global economic integration as a complex and uneven process, rather than an unambiguously positive or negative expression of globalization. While globalization has integrated tribal communities into wider economic activities and created new opportunities, it has also increased marginalization, insecurity and economic dependence among many tribal groups. (Xaxa 84). These shifts in tribal economic life are intricately tied to wider social and cultural changes, and constitute an important dimension of broader debates about tribal identity and cultural continuity in the era of liberalisation.

Cultural Representation and the Politics of Visibility

In the era of globalization, the construction and perception of tribal culture as ideas have been changed with its reinforced connection by transnational media, tourism, intermediaries of development and academic knowledge citationality (Appadurai 43). Global media is powerful tool of visibility as it has enabled the tribals to enter into the national and international publics to what were beyond their reach so far. Such visibility, however, is

usually selective, and is always inscribed within hegemonic culture systems, forming stereotypical, romanticizing images of tribal culture as fixed, exotic or anachronous. These images encapsulate a culture within a single symbolic frame, as if it were not a culture dynamic and constantly evolving over time, and not subject to the cultural diversity found within it. Commercialization of tribal rituals, dress and festivals is also accentuated by the presence of tourist driven narratives which abate the rooted cultural practices to superficially commoditized spectacle of entertainment. Indeed, as Urry also notes, tourism can create a mythified version of culture, rather than a lived social reality (Urry 152). In the past, other fields of study have challenged and affirmed these ways of representing the discipline of anthropology, and even development studies to some degree. Representation processes are the key means of constructing, representing, and contesting both external and internal actors' notions of what tribal identities are.

The politics of representation is deeply related to language, indigenous epistemologies and the movement of knowledge that is foundational to the identity of the tribal people and their sustainability. It is widely recognized in the literature that indigenous languages are not merely as systems of communication, but carriers of a people's collective memory, oral history and ecological knowledge and cultural value. Language is one of the important elements that are used in the transmission of social norms, beliefs, values, from generation to generation. The globalization has led to the dominance of national and global languages, in formal education, media and markets, to the detriment of tribal languages. Indeed this linguistic hierarchisation has resulted in language shift by the younger generations, where older modes of inter-generational knowledge transfer are unassertive. Mainstream education-based programs tend to ignore oral transmission, folklore, and learning through action in the field, which have preserved tribal cultures. At the same time, transnational knowledge hierarchies have normalized forms of knowledge in writing and science and in markets throughout the world, leaving indigenous forms of knowing out of sight or underrated in the mainstream of development discourse. Escobar states that local wisdom is denounced by discourses about development, as being unscientific and backwards (53).

But the literature also showcases expressions of 'tribal agency' and 'tribal resilience' in the form of coping strategies that are working in the contexts of these challenges. The examples used above to document cultural issues and experiences through digital platforms can also be found in community educational practices and language revitalization, modelling how global tools used to document indigenous knowledge are being taken over to preserve traditional knowledge and its transmission. It is crucial to develop digital archives, to establish Web-based storytelling and storytelling in the community through the use of media. Development of digital archives, Web-based storytelling, and community-based media facilities are important tools that preserved oral tradition and inter-generational knowledge transfer. Globalization can thus help achieve opposite outcomes: its impact on the latter prospects of cultural diffusion is dangerous, so is the addition of new tools to preserve culture. The papers submitted for examination are premised on the notion that cultural continuity is neither simply about maintaining culture as it is but rather one aspect of the giving and granting of meaning, authority and visibility in new global contexts. When tribal populations have greater control of representation and knowledge production, globalization constitutes a site

for cultural assertion rather than cultural erosion.

Identity Negotiation among Tribal Youth

The review of literature focuses on how tribal young people are living their identity within this global reality. Most scholars, however, also challenge the stereotype that tribal young people are an avant-garde of sorts poised between a traditional value system on one hand and the claim of a fast-modernizing world on the other (Xaxa 112). This middle space often creates tension, negotiation, and redefinition of culture rather than providing the unproblematic definition we might wish for. The role of education as a key factor in the negotiating process of youth identities has been recognized in the literature. While formal education for tribal youth, especially those who access it in non-tribal or urban areas tends to work in parallel with or against hegemonic cultural practices and elements such as language, knowledge structures, and everyday patterns of sociability. It is hardly surprising then, that much research confirms the growing tension between institutional knowledge systems and local ways of learning transmitted through community practices, oral history, and the authority of its elders. This imbalance is highlighted by the fact that the formal education systems "legitimize" dominant culture and values, while indigenous knowledge systems and local approaches to knowing stay marginalised or less valued within the formal education institutions. (Bourdieu 241)

Literature also presents another aspect of compulsory migration in the pursuit of education and employment status as an important determinant of the identity of the youth of tribes. These experiences may produce diasporic subjects whose sense of self is splintered as they try to negotiate the gulf that lies between their own culture and received wisdom about what it means to belong in their new country. They are exposed to other ideas, political awareness, and economics opportunities during migration, where tribal youth have the opportunity to unwittingly miss their culture but regenerate a new culture. A sense of mobility commonly accompanies the formation of hybridized Identities which are the blend of traditional values with modern aspirations. Coping with formal and informal employment also affects perceptions of self, especially in relation to occupational mobility, which is its connection with changing social perceptions, lifestyle and status within the village.

Recent focus has been on digital exposure and media use of tribal youth. There are two assumed ways social media, mobile devices and digital platforms have an impact: On the one hand, they speed up cultural homogenization through spreading global dominant cultures and on the other they offer new possibilities for cultural expression, networking and invention of indigenous identity. Allowing the imagination of the possible to open onto the margins, the electronic media has given new contours and throws to the imaginations of marginal communities, the ability to imagine alternative forms of subjectivity, alternative experiences of subjectivity even those that would problematise local tyranny (Appadurai 53). This implies the focus of literature turns to generational change, as younger generations embrace select aspects from modernity but still hold onto symbolic and emotional connections with their culture. These written works are a first-person expression of tribal youth as actors in their quest to negotiate their educational and migration identities as well as their digital connectivity.

Globalization as a Space for Cultural Reassertion

This section critiques and deconstructs academic narratives of globalization as a homogenous culture system, and views globalization as more than a space of oppression, but also a 'space of resonance' in which culture coexists in the presence of tribal people. Scholars argue, on the one hand, that globalization is an introduction of outside economic and cultural influences, and on the other mainstreaming existing cultural resources and means into new political spaces, storytelling or mapping artistic heritage to gain increased presence and fame in cultural politics. That is, on the one hand, globalization might be a vector for bringing in new forces to a culture, while on the other globalization may provide new spaces and opportunities for rejuvenating and revitalizing the culture. The literature acknowledges the role of improved connectivity, transnational networking, and access to global platforms in which tribal peoples articulate their identities outside a local vernacular thus increasing the scale and visibility of indigenous cultural expression.

Others also contend that the possibility of a globalized present makes indigenous movements able to use the political, legal and media resources of our times to demand cultural recognition and rights. These studies demonstrate the ways in which global human rights discourses and Indigenous internationalisms have helped indigenous peoples universalize their demands as conflicts concerning cultural autonomy and self-determination. Globalization has enabled indigenous peoples various new forms of translation from local struggles to universal moral claims (Niezen 98). The role of global and digital media in reinvigoration is further brought to the fore by the literature. Academics also report that tribal communities have begun to rely on social media, digital archives, and online networks for recording oral history, furthering indigenous art, language instruction and the transfer of knowledge to new generations. Digital participation is therefore seen as a part of cultural continuation through new forms of communication being assimilated. Furthermore, academic debates suggest that globalization has facilitated a re-evaluation of the indigenous knowledge systems with respect to natural resource management, sustainability as well as culture. Globalization is depicted in the literature as a contested but empowering site of struggle where tribal communities are not only passive recipients of global transformations but also continue to play active roles in contesting power, seeking cultural and less visible recognition and identifying differently (Giddens 78).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed shows quite transparently that tribal identity in the age of globalization should not be conceptualized as a fixed or static category, nor ought it to be naively depicted as cultural forms destined for erosion by alien forces. However, academic research consistently suggests that tribal identity is flexible and persistently redefined in many aspects in response to complex relations with economic, political, technological and cultural phenomena linked to globalization. However, despite the disruption in traditional livelihoods, support systems and cultural practices due to global market integration, mass media outreach, migration and development-based interventions based on development models throughout the century, they have not led to tribal cultures being completely obliterated. Instead, the literature suggests that culture remains 'same but different' where

tribe members see their own tradition as being part of a timeless and unchanging heritage, yet it is also an evolving way to respond to the contemporary world. Rather, it is an indication that cultural continuity is handled in adaptive ways such as selective adoption and strategic resistance, even though it actively negotiates with outside influences, yet it retains the core elements of the bearing of a tribe. Studies point to a need worthy of attention which questions the passiveness of tribal societies, as well as the capacity of the peoples to negotiate and reinterpret, reformulate, and give form to tradition in the new context. There are still language, rituals, customary rules and collective memory of indigenous peoples that remain, only in a modified form, as witness to a resilient tribal culture despite threats and challenges from a globalized world. Developers, at the same time, discourage romantic notions of cultural survival, while others point to an unequal sharing of benefits and costs associated with globalization, which leads to growing social and economic divisions within members of tribal communities. Universal access to education, political representation and protection of the culture through legal and electronic means, are important determinants for particular tribal groups in keeping cultural continuity. But, if indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives are not explored during the development projects, the role of state policies and development paradigms becomes a very critical point to articulate/disarticulate the identity of the tribals too. Overall, the literature has focused attention on the fact that globalization is a process with some elements that are destructive and contradictory and others that are not. To appreciate the processes through which cultural continuity is negotiated in modern times, recognition of the role of tribal agency and the diversity of tribal people's experiences must be present.

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