

NINTH DR. AMITABH CHOWDHURY ANNUAL MEMORIAL LECTURE
ON
“TRIBE AND CASTE”
BY
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I have come here to deliver a Lecture, but more important than that, this is an occasion for remembrance; and I have come to join all of you, in paying my tribute not just to the person in whose memory the Lecture has been named; but to the entire Chowdhury family. In last few weeks and months, as I have got to know the family, I have to appreciate what the family stands for in India today. We live in a country, which is full of disorder, turmoil, chaos and despair, what is going to happen to this country? If you look at public life-you have all kinds of disturbing and distracting news. But there is something, to which you can always turn back to and that is a family. I think, that the Chowdhury family stands as an exemplar of all virtues that a good society ought to embody. Let, me begin by saying, when Justice Chowdhury, first approached me, I was a little hesitant. I was hesitant to accept, because in the past, I used to love going from place to place. But, I feel that, as I grow older, my Lecturing days should soon come to an end. I was as such somewhat hesitant to take on this commitment. But I was so impressed by his persuasiveness and by the persuasiveness of his daughter, who would send

me messages through the Internet and once the two of them came to see me in my house, at Jorbag; and I really had no resistance then. So, I decided that, I would come and I am before you all to join you in paying tribute not only to a remarkable man but also to a remarkable family.

I have decided to speak on a subject, which is been of academic interest to me as an Anthropologists, and it is of interest to the Anthropologists since the beginning of the century. It is a subject which was taught to us as students. Professor Bhagawati and I were student in the same Department of Anthropology, at the Calcutta University; and we were taught about Tribes and Castes and Castes and Tribes. I found that there was an excess of concentration in the teaching, which was administered to us. There was an excess of concentration on Tribes and Castes; and when we went to meet my other friends in the other parts of the University, who studied economics, politics, history- Economics was then the most prestigious discipline in the University of Calcutta. In my time, included people like Somnath Chakravarty, Amartya Sen. Both of whom, I caught up again in 1950's when I came to teach, in the University of Delhi; in the late 1950's and early 1960's and these two Amartya Sen, Somnath Chakravarty, Parthasarathi, there were many others, they used to say, what is all this pre-occupation with Caste and Tribes? This belongs to India's past. This belongs to India's past. Why don't you Anthropologists and Sociologists, pay more interests in the near future? Today, when I look back, on those conversations, I think even though it might have appeared then that the pre-occupation with Castes and Tribes was

excessive, I think it has come back to a period at last, even though it might have seemed just after Independence, if it might have seemed, that the relation of caste and tribe was a thing of the past and that it would gradually be eased out of this society and it would be replaced by other divisions, which are more characteristics of progressive, advanced modern societies. But, I don't think that, Caste and tribe have made a space from the hearts and minds of man today. Although, it might have been displaced from the hearts and minds of some people, but they have not been displaced from the hearts and minds of a very large number of humans, from different walks of life. So, for someone who grew up in the city of Calcutta, which had a relatively progressive atmosphere, in the 1950's and 1960's and then when I went to teach, in a premier Institution of Social Science scholarship and research in Delhi, it seemed to me, that preoccupation with other aspects of society, is much more germane and people began to think about division of class based on income, occupation, education and so on. But we will come back to the subject of Caste and Tribe for the likely reason, and I will explain how this preoccupation of caste and tribes began. When the British, took over the administration of India, in the 19th century, and naturally, they wanted to know, about the country for whose governance they were responsible, and they engaged in a fairly elaborate social mapping of the population of India. I think they were struck, by the enormous difference between England and Europe on one side and India on the other side. I think they exaggerated the difference, but it would be unfruitful not to have been struck by the difference.

Because, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Europe was advanced, Europe was moving forward; whereas India had become somewhat stagnant society. So they regarded India's social order, as being static and stagnant and rooted in the past with very little dynamism and very little scope for change. And, the in which way they saw it, Indian society or India was a society of Castes and Communities rather than a Nation of citizens. And that is the question that I would like to pose before you today. Has nothing changed in India? Does it remain a society of Castes and Community- has it not moved forward? In becoming a Nation of Citizens and if it does not will those who has been leading the nationalists movement and building modern Indian society through the Nationalists Movement and who created the Constitution of India, and who were determined to make India a different kind of society from what it had been in the past. Were they denuded in thinking that India can ever seize to be a Society of Caste and Communities and emerge as a Nation of Citizens? By Nation of Citizens, I simply mean - A Nation of Individuals who are judged on merit without consideration of race, caste, and gender. If you look at our Constitution- Part III of our Constitution talks about, the Equality of Opportunity and it emphasizes on Equality of opportunity without consideration of race, caste, and gender. Citizenship is something, which is conferred independently of consideration of caste, creed, gender and I think that for people of the Nehru's generation, and the generation preceding Nehru's generation, it could be a distinct possibility that India could emerge as a Nation of Citizens. I haven't given up hope, that it will

ultimately emerge as a Nation of Citizens, but we had not anticipated that a old pox that will come up on that path- from being a Society of Castes and Communities to becoming a Nation of Citizens. I think that the British were telling us that – “You know yours is a very different kind of society from the societies in which democracy has taken root”. Yours is a very different kind of society- it is a hierarchical society which gives very little value to the Individual as a Citizen. Mr. Nehru was looking back on Indian society, in the past. Mr. Nehru made the same point in his Discovery of India, which was published a year before Independence. He said that in India, it is the group and not the individual that counts, and I will relate what these groups are: the village communities, the joint family and castes. It is these that count rather, than the individual. But Mr. Nehru was also expecting that new currents, had been setting motion by the Nationalists Movement, which would ensure that the Individual as Citizen would have to take his space in the new order of things. So there was this kind of dialectic, if I may be use the word- between the Colonial Anthropologists and the Nationalists Community. It is a very complex dialectic. As the British had their own justifications for trying to create for their own advantage; and for what they believed to be the advantage of proper balance. I think they had the right to create a kind of social map of the country. And they had certain advantage - they came from outside and they felt, that they could view more objectively, as outsiders as people who could take a detached and objective view of the nature of the society, which they thought was completely different from the kinds of society that was already moving

forward in European countries. So this task of the social mapping of India, infact these is what led to the creation of Anthropology in this country, in the 19th century. Colonial Anthropology, in the 19th century began within the operation of the Censuses; with the compendia of Tribes and Castes. There were all sorts of volumes offered: that you have **Risley's**, "**Tribes and Castes of Bengal**", you have **Thurstons**, "**Tribes and Castes of South India**". They were really interested in trying to get an idea of what kind of a society, it was. Now, I think in doing these, they had a mixture of all the Tribes. I don't think they were doing it out of fight for lands. I think they were genuinely puzzled by the nature of the Indian society and in doing that...I think in discovering and characterizing, they naturally exaggerated some of the peak in the future, and that become an obsession with them; and the Indians the educated Indians who were the carriers of the emerging spirit of Assuism felt annoyed and upset about these. They felt that the British were interested on enjoying the ancient to these divisions and subdivisions and sub-sub-divisions in this society in the interest of keeping our rights with natural and just rights away from us. So, if you look at the writings of the Anthropologists...I think the British did some very valuable things. The social mapping of India- they started it; and to be fair to them, they took the assistance of the Indians, they collaborated with the Indians, and they had Indian assistance and sometimes they also had Indian collaborators. And there were many of them, many of them, were genuinely interested in helping Indians to understand themselves and not to be denuded by these false promises of Western Liberals, who think

that Democracy is for both societies. Democracy is not for the Indian society, because it is a very different kind of society. Question before us today, is therefore - more than a hundred and fifty years after we started- have we lost our way, in trying to move from being a society of castes and tribes to becoming a Nation of citizens? Have we lost our ways out there? But we can see if we look at the Televisions, read the Newspapers, talk to people; you can see that the main preoccupation in public discussions, particularly in political discussions, is with the division of Indian society from Tribes and Castes; and without denying it, the importance of it, I think they tend to divert attention away from the many new things, that are emerging in Indian society. They are emerging slowly, after meeting many kinds of road gaps. I think among the most interesting developments, in India since Independence, has been the emergence of a new occupational order, and this occupational order has grown and become elaborate and has developed its own system of ranking, which does not follow exactly the system of castes hierarchy. Infact, the new occupational order has created a new middle class- it has been expanded. It began to grow with the growth of the new Universities in the Metropolitan in the provincial capital of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras when the first two Universities were started and then the Law Colleges, the Medical Colleges and so on. A new middle class began to grow. It's true, that most of the recruits of the new middle class, most of those who took advantage of the opportunities and educational occupations came from a rather narrow band of upper class. That is true! It is true, but it is no longer true to the same extent

today, that it was 150 years ago and we must not lose sight of the important part in creating a new economic atmosphere in India, his name is Nandan Nilekani. He is now very much in News because of his Aadhaar card. You know, you talk about the importance of Caste and Tribes and all these things. What is its importance? You know- my wife married me. She is not of my caste- we have married. I doubt, very much, that my children will marry within their castes. So, what is that keeps this particular kind of preoccupation in force? I think that, Politics has a large part to play in this. Politics has had a large part to play in this. And when the British were trying – I think with all sincerity, they were trying to give us a social map of tribes and castes, and they tried it as precise, as they could in doing this. Now, if as an Anthropologists', if you look at Tribes and Castes, then the Anthropological definition of a Tribe is very different from the Anthropological definition of a Caste - because a Tribe is a small and a relatively homogeneous group with distinct boundaries, which is relatively homogeneous; relatively undifferentiated; relatively unstratified. Whereas a caste is a unique, it is a very highly stratified system. So, on the one hand, there is this pre-occupation with the colonial ethnographers with Tribe and Castes and Castes and Tribe. On the other hand, no matter how hard they try, they fail to successfully give us the criterion, or create criterion for themselves, which would enable them to tell us- what is a Tribe and what is a Castes? How does one differentiate between a Tribe and a Caste? Nobody would call the Bengalis a Tribe. But the Ondas are a Tribe, the Khasis are a Tribe, the Ao's are a Tribe. So, there

must be some criterion, by which we can say, one kind of group is a Tribe and another kind of group is not a Tribe. It is a unique and a different kind of system. But the Ethnographers, who are so obsessed with making lists of Tribes and Castes, were continuously confused by their efforts to distinguish between Tribes and Castes. They frequently- if you look at the earlier Ethnographers, they frequently described the second group, sometimes as a Castes, sometimes as a Tribe. What does this mean? It simply means to me, that the Tribes which they were describing, were not the same as the Tribes of any other Nation, or the Tribes of as they were defined in a few Anthropological Literature and all of this was changing during the very process by which they were trying to distinguish the one from the other. Now, I think this was understood, by the Indian Anthropologists, who entered into this kind of study, that the Tribes that we see today, among whom we do view. The first Department of Anthropology, in the country was started in 1922, in the University of Calcutta, which was the same year, in which the first professional journal called "***Melanesian Anthropology***", was also started in 1922. It was the hallmark of Anthropology that you went to the field; and the Anthropologists in those days did fieldwork amongst the Tribes. In the 20's, 30's and 40's; they did fieldwork amongst the Tribes. So, when these young leaders and scholars went to do fieldwork in Somnathpur, what is now Jharkhand or in the North East-many of them came to the North East, to do fieldwork; they found that the boots which were designated as Tribes in the colonial Ethnography, were changing. They were changing and they were not

really the same as the Textbook idea of what a Tribe is? One of the most distinguished Anthropologists of the generation, preceding mine, was a man called D.N. Mazumdar. He set up the Department of Anthropology, in Lucknow University and Dr. Mazumdar, made a study of the whole Tribe in what was then Somnathpur, what was then Jharkhand; and the title of his book was- '**A Tribe in Transition**'. And it was generally believed that, Tribes are undergoing change; change into what? This is not an easy question to answer. My old Teacher, N.K. Bose, who was also an Anthropologist, and did extensive work amongst the Tribal population in Orissa and Chota Nagpur. He wrote a paper, which became quite well known called, '**Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption**'; and he argued that, in Indian society for long ages past, a group which started as a Tribe in relative isolation in the Rain and Forest area of the country, gradually became more inter-connected, with a larger society, based on Caste. After that it became more of inter-connected with the larger society based on castes, it gradually moved into the ambit of that society; and became a part of the larger division of labour and larger system of hierarchy and generally it was given a place at the bottom, not at the top. And, in course of time, it came to be regarded as a Caste or a kind of Caste. Does that process continue? I think that process has been reversed to some extent, because today, whereas in the first half of 19th century, a Tribe do not have disdained to becoming a caste in the larger scheme of things. Today, the Tribe does not want to become a part of the caste. We must understand the political process, which has led to this outcome. So, the same political process

ensures that, what was once identified as a Tribe cannot or will not discard its designation as a Tribe...does not want to discard its designation as a Tribe. As such, what was said by Dr. Mazumdar- his view of the future has been relied. Dr. Mazumdar thought, that these Tribes in transition, they are not tribes in transition; they would become something different in course of time. I think, he was very clear that, they would become castes. He felt that they would become something different. They would lose their identity in the larger society of what it was. The members of the Tribal community, would become clerks, they would go to school, they would become lawyers, Doctors and whatever it is, peons, chaprasis; and they would become a part of the larger National system; occupy a certain position as individual members in the occupation system. There was some reason for thinking in that way, because if you look at other castes and countries; or if you look at the evolution of human society, then any Anthropologists would barely dispute, there was a time in human history, where the typical characteristics, social formation was the formation of the Tribe. You need not have States or Nations in the past. That is a later stage in the development of human society. Nations and States emerge in course of time, through evolution, through greater concentration of numbers through greater division of labour in the greater stratification; and we have some historical evidence, that this has happened in Europe. We have very good historical evidence that this has happened in Europe. In Europe for instance, if you read the history of Germany for instance, in normal times, Germany was full of tribes. Tacitus, the great Roman historian of Germany- he

describes German society, by calling the constituent parts of German society as Tribes. The Goths, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Burgundians, the Lombards. They are described as Tribes and more or less correctly described as Tribes. But if you look for those Tribes in Germany today, even the most powerful microscope will not enable you to find, what has happened. They have transformed themselves and they have merged themselves into the larger genre of Nation; or into the larger family. It is same as France or Scandinavia, they have merged; and it is this idea that D.N. Mazumdar had in mind; when he wrote his book a *“Tribe in Transition”*. This was also possibly going to happen in India, but it hasn't happened in India and I don't see any immediate signs of this kind of thing happening in India. This is partly because; there is a political cream, attached to the identity of a Tribe or as a Caste; because these identities are extremely useful for globalizing electoral support, in their own Tribal communities; and this first observation of this was made by M.N. Srinivas. That never has politics has given a new lease of life to castes, and precisely the time after independence, when people who were expecting that castes would relax its grip over the population. Demographic politics, gave a new lease of life to castes, because it came to be used as an important thesis for mobilizing electoral support. Other than that, I have not done any detailed study about Tribal population, till date, but I feel that if the idea of the Tribe...this is what Tacitus had in mind...when he talked about the Tribes in Germany, France and Scandinavia...that these were relatively homogeneous groups of people, who lived by relatively simple economic order

and they were then gradually merged as the economy advanced...as the political order advanced, they became merged into the larger Nation. So, this is not happening in India. If you look at any tribe, any particular tribes, then you go back to what it was in the 19th century, you will find that it was a much more homogeneous and undifferentiated unit. Its members were more or less following, roughly the same occupation. They were speaking the same language; there was no differentiation in terms of education, they were more or less homogeneous. In the course of development, there has been a great deal of differentiation, in terms of education, occupation and income. Therefore, one would expect reduced, because once the group which was homogeneous and the Tribes maintained the spontaneity- married between the same communities. Once, that becomes so highly differentiated in terms of income, occupation and education; one would have thought that the sense of its identity as a receded Tribe. This is the paradox of Indian society- that each castes, each tribe, has become more and not less homogeneous- in terms of income, occupation and education than in the past. At the same time, I think each caste and each tribe, at least in many cases, has become more conscious, of its state of identity. It does not want to discard and it does not want to move away from it. The peculiar phenomenon, has happened when there are groups, which has been designated as other pattern of classes- not Tribe, which has some famous example- the North India where I live, they have decided that they are now misclassified, they are not Other backward class, they are the Scheduled Tribe or they should be included as Scheduled

Tribe. So what is the problem in this? The problem in this is that- why do they not want to be Other Backward Class...? Why do they want to be re-designated as a Scheduled Tribe? They don't want to be designated as Other Backward Class, because the Jats have recently been included in the list of Other Backward Classes and that being so, they would provide a very strong competition for the benefits of education and occupation to the Gujjars. Perhaps it would be easier, if they were re-designated as a Scheduled Tribe. So while re-designating them as Scheduled Tribe... they want to be Scheduled Tribe. You are Assamese and you want to call yourself Japanese, why not...? But, the problem is, each time it is done, then it would meet with resistance from the Mina's who are the dominant among the Schedule Tribes in that area... because the Mina's fear that the Gujjars, since they are more advanced- they would take away some of the benefits, which they have enjoyed as members of the Scheduled Tribe. So the desire to be designated as a Tribe rather than a caste today is associated with the range of the benefits which one might get from being designated in a certain category, rather than in another category. As I have said, Tribes have gradually absorbed themselves into the Nation and lost their identity. This is what has happened in India, and the most peculiar feature in India, we have developed there is no doubt about it; our economic growth has picked up in the last twenty-twenty five years and it will pick up; and although the economic growth was not very rapid, in the first four or five decades of Independence, nevertheless there was some economic growth. But, how does it come about

that with increasing economic growth, the size and not only the size the proportion of Scheduled Tribes has also increased? Because, the conventional wisdom, was that with development, with advancement, with the emergence of new industry, with migration from one part of the country to another, the boundaries which separated tribes from tribal group disappeared. And what was considered, as a tribal way of life, would also cease to exist. You look at any textbook of Anthropology; and it always defines a tribe, as a relatively small, isolated and homogeneous group; undifferentiated and unstratified. And as a Sociologist it seems to me, paradoxical that, today many of the larger tribes have acted, as a rigorous middle class. There is a middle class that has emerged, in many major tribes. The existence of the middle class, in the Tribe, is from the Anthropological community or the classical Anthropological community, no contradiction in terms. Because, once the group become differentiated into Middle class, Upper Middle class, lower Middle class; working class; peasant; it ceases to be a Tribe. Because, the hallmark of a Tribe is that, it is a community, which is homogeneous and which is linked together by Tribes of kinship. The idea is that the Tribe- if you had the patience and the time, all the members of every tribe, will be put on a single genie' ism and that it what made it a Tribe. And if the Tribe has become so large and it has become differentiated and it has a middle class as well as an upper middle class, this becomes extremely difficult to do. Now I don't see that... because you see I think...that the process whereby the Indian economy, is moving forward, that will continue. I think occupational

differentiation...differentiation in terms of occupation, income, education, will continue...within each tribe...within each caste, there is no doubt about it. There will be a growing middle class in each tribe, each caste, and there will be a link, there will be links across tribes and castes, as far as class is concerned, as far as the Middle class is concerned. So, the straight phenomenon in Indian society today, is that, two things seem to be happening simultaneously. The social demands of a dynamic economic order, which is based on the market- the social demands of such a dynamic economic order ensure that the homogeneity of groups, based on birth, kinship, tribes, caste, will be seriously disturbed, and it is being disturbed. At the same time, the political demands of electoral politics require that the group, whether it is a caste or a tribe, asserts its identity as a distinct political identity. Because, it is much easier to mobilize electoral support on the basis of castes and community, then it is on the basis of class. Because, class is always a shadowing matter- you belong to upper middle class? Or the Lower middle class? Economic differentiation is very important. It is very important, and it has become more and more important in India today, in my judgment. But nowhere in the world- is economic differentiation being as effective as the basis for mobilizing electoral support; as the identities of castes and community. So, the economic system ranks our society in one direction and the demands of democratic politics rank it in a different direction. So this is the kind of thing that has been the issue to think about and worry about; instead of believing that some people, who want to assert their tribal identities, are even

people who want to keep democracy back. They think that- this is the way of asserting in a democracy. Or there are some people, who want to move the economy forward and say that, people should be selected; people should be employed, without consideration of caste, creed or gender- in terms of merit, ability and performance. I don't think those claims can be denied either. So, I think there are two sets of conflicting claims, in demands, which will keep this society in turmoil. And I think that, that is how democracy moves. I think that, the whole idea over the last fifty years and looking at the experience of the India, that the movement of democracy is a disorderly movement. Don't expect it to move on one single line. It moves as a dialectical process, and it has to contain many conflicting aims and tendencies; and we live in a society where we are performing an experimental nation building. I don't think that experiment which people of Nehru's generation started or even before him; the first leaders of the Indian Nationalist Congress started. They experimented tribes to build a nation of citizens. I think there are lots of Indians who do that and want to do and they are important too. At the same time, we should not discard power and force of those who want to represent Indian society as basing their society as Castes and communities. So, how this will pay off in future, nobody can tell, what course democracy will take in any part of the globe? We can only wish that it does well. And I think that in India, democracy is relatively safe and simpler. Thank you!