



**POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT**

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# TRIBAL LANGUAGES, ART AND CULTURE

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## Structures

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## OBJECTIVES

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This unit gives a description about the language, art and culture of the tribes which are a part of India. Every tribal society in India is very rich in terms of their tribal language, culture as well as their art forms which are not only vibrant but also conventional. Tribal language, culture and art generally reflect the creative energy found in the tribal areas among the tribal people. This unit attempts to provide information about their origin, social and cultural characteristics and their present status with the object of developing an understanding in the learner about the distinct features of the tribal language, culture and art. After reading this unit you, should be able to:

- trace the origin of the tribes in India;
- understand the different tribal languages in India;
- feel the tribal culture that has been a part of the Indian society; and
- trace the growth and development of tribal art.

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## INTRODUCTION

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India, as we know, is a land of multicultural diversities. Defining India has never been an easy task with respect to its cultural plurality and diversity. India encompasses millions of cultural and linguistically diverse languages and dialects. If one tends to define a particular culture or a part of India, it would still be incomplete in the sense that, it would still lack the knowledge of another scholar or researcher in that particular field. Hence, the task of defining and understanding India in one specific arena becomes a researcher's plight.

The primary objective for us, then remains, that it should concentrate on the objective factual findings and not subjective conclusions since terms such as 'culture' or 'tribes' has to be dealt carefully and with much contemplation. India, a country with 29 States and 7 Union Territories consists of people and traditions which vary from each other from one state to the other.

In this chapter we shall try and study the various tribes of India with special attention to their languages and cultures.

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## TRIBES IN INDIA

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The word 'Tribe' according to sociology means, "A unit of sociopolitical organization consisting of a number of families, clans, or other groups who share a common ancestry and culture." Hence, the term 'Tribe' can be traced back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century medieval English where 'tribe' was meant to be the biblical connotation of "the twelve tribes of Israel". The word is from Old French *tribu*, in turn from Latin *tribus*, referring to the original tripartite ethnic division of the Roman state : Ramnes (Ramnenses), Tities (Titienses), and Luceres.

In India, on the other hand, it seems 'tribes' has inhabited the Indian sub-continent for a very long period of time. The species known as *Ramapithecus* was found in the Siwalik foothills of the northwestern Himalayas. The people of India belong to different anthropological stocks. According to Dr. B. S. Guha, the population of India is derived from six main ethnic groups:

- 1) **Negritos**: The Negritos or the brachycephalic (broad headed) from Africa were the earliest people to inhabit India. They are survived in their original habitat in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For example the Andamanis tribe in India.
- 2) **Pro-Australoids or Austrics**: After the Negritos, the Austrics came to inhabit India. They represent a race of people, with wavy and curly hair plentifully distributed over their brown bodies, long heads with low foreheads and prominent eye ridges, noses with low and broad roots, thick jaws, large palates and teeth and small chins. Austrics tribes, which are spread over the whole of India, Myanmar and the islands of South East Asia, are believed to "form the bedrock of the people". They were the main builders of the Indus Valley Civilisation.
- 3) **Mongoloids**: The Mongoloids are the people who have features that are common to those of the people of Mongolia, China and Tibet. These tribal groups are located in the Northeastern part of India in states like Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya and also in Ladakh and Sikkim.
- 4) **Dravidian**: The Dravidians spread all over India, surpassing the population of the first two peoples Negritos and Austrics. It is believed that they are the group of people who formed the backbone of the Harappan and the Indus Valley civilisation. This group comprise of the whole of Mediterranean. This group constitutes the bulk of the scheduled castes in the North India. This group has a sub-type called *Oriental* group.

- 5) **Western Brachycephals**: There is not much information on this particular group. But it is believed that the Parsi population of India belongs to this group.
- 6) **Nordics**: Nordics or Indo-Aryans are the last immigrants into India. They comprise the group of Indo-Iranians. Their first home in India was western and northern Punjab, from where they spread to the Valley of the Ganga and beyond. Many of these tribes belong to the “upper castes”.

Apart from the origins of these tribes in the Indian Sub-continent, they are now, in present day, divided into several units of tribes having different cultures and languages. We shall now look into a list of tribal languages in India which constitutes much of the linguistical data in India.

Indian languages have evolved from different sets of stocks and are closely related to the different ethnic groups in India. Broadly the Indian languages can be divided into six groups such as:

1. Indo-Aryan
2. Dravidian
3. Sino-Tibetan
4. Negroid
5. Austric
6. Others

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## 4.0 TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA

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Languages of India, like the culture and tribes of India are numerous. It is often believed that in one set of tribe, there is also another dialect spoken within the same tribal group. These tribal languages are initially considered to be folk languages spoken by a particular group of tribe. Indian tribal languages can be defined as essentially “folk” languages, spoken by people of ethnic groups who prefer to live in relatively isolated groups. Indian tribal languages can simply be defined as the traditional languages utilised by the tribal folk. ‘Folk’, in its simplest of definition means “group of people”, these languages emerge from the tribal languages spoken during time immemorial. Since the languages of the Indian tribes are complex and vary from one another they are preserved orally in the form of songs, folktales and legends. The tales of the folk mainly comprise of these languages and dialects.

Some of the tribal languages prevalent in India are Abujmaria, Garo, Aaria and Tsangla, Saurashtri etc. The Garo Language is spoken by the tribal communities residing in and around Garo Hills, Meghalaya, Tripura, Western Assam and Nagaland. Several dialects of this language include Megam., Chisak, Atong etc. Another tribal language is Abujmaria which is spoken by the people of Abujmar hills in Bastar district. The Paite, Thadou, Hmar, and the Tangkhul languages are some of the tribal languages spoken in most of the north eastern parts of the Indian sub-continent. Some of the leading tribal language speaking groups comprise: Garo Tribes, Chakma Tribes, Naga Tribes, Gond Tribes, Mizo Tribes, Santhali Tribes, Khasia Tribes, Oraon Tribes and Manipuri tribesmen.

Apart from these tribal languages, there are some other tribal languages namely, Gadaba spoken by the people of Koraput district of Orissa, Ariya spoken by the tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh, Tsangla which is spoken in some villages of Arunachal Pradesh.

Indian Tribal languages are extremely orderly and well organised, owing to a developed past and the enlightened educational interference. Garo and Chakma languages have a slight Chinese hint to their diction. There lies an elementary similarity between the Garo and Magh Languages, as both tribes belong to the same origin. Munda, Santhali, Kol, Khasia, Garo and Kurukh are interrelated languages. Munda and Karukh regarded as equivalent languages, due to the syntax and verbs of both are almost identical. Munda, Santhali and Kol languages are even more ancient than the Indo-Aryan languages. These tribal languages further belong to Austro-Asian, Indo-Chinese, and Chinese-Tibetan, Tibetan –Burman or Dravidian Families. As these tribal groups have mostly migrated from places mentioned, they have adapted their languages principally from those nations.

Some of the popular languages spoken by the tribes of India are as follows:

Bhatri, Bhilli, Bhunjia, Chakma, hhatigarhi, Dhanki, Dhodia, hundhari, Gadiali, Gamit/Gavti, Garasia / Girasia, Gojri / Gujjari, Gujarati, Hajong, Halbi, Harauti, Hindi, Jaunsari, Kachchi, Konkani, Marathi, Mavchi, Mewnri, Nagpuri, Naikadi, Nimari, Oriya, Rathi, Sardohi, Shina, Tharu, Wagri, Warli among many others.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) List the different tribal languages prevalent in India.

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**The Indo-Aryan Tribal Languages**

From time to time, the number of the tribal languages varies. Indo-Aryan tribal language speakers are distributed and scattered over a huge geographical territory of the country. The speakers of this family of tribal language comprise over a total population of almost 491 million people. The northern, eastern, western and central portions of India are full with people who speak the Indo-Aryan languages. More than 574 mother tongues comprise of this family of tribal language in India (Ishtiaq, 1999). Some of the languages are supposed to have great literary traditions and activities. In the family of Indo-Aryan tribal languages there is actually no dearth of literature.

Among the tribal languages spoken under the Indo-Aryan families the three main languages are Bhili language, Khandeshi and Halabi. These three languages