

## TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA: POPULAR RHETORIC AND LIVED REALITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Popular rhetoric on gender relations in tribal societies in general, and the status of tribal women in particular, swings between two uncompromising extremes. While the development administrators and some selected NGOs perceive an impressive state of empowerment of tribal women, thanks to the post-independence developmental interventions, their critiques, on the other hand, highlight their destitution in more than one instances. Looking at these mutually antagonistic paradigms, I contend that tribal gender relations have not yet received critical attention, which is due to them. As I have been arguing for quite some time now, it is not prudent to assert a rigid Cartesian dichotomy between a 'higher' and a 'lower' status of a tribal woman vis-à-vis a tribal man. Contrarily, I suggest, it is a mixed bag of specificities and complexities that needs critical examination without being tempted to make a sweeping generalization. I intend to discuss in this paper how economic self-sufficiency and structural dependence, ritual power-holding and ritual segregation, submissiveness and stiff resistance to domination, etc. are witnessed in the life of a tribal woman that should refrain us from looking at status as a monolithic entity rather than as a dynamic one.

**Keywords:** *Gender relations, Tribal women, Cartesian dichotomy.*

Despite an impressive growth in global anthropology in terms of the quantity of research output, the quality of its research contents, and the applications of its research findings, sometimes I tend to believe that Indian anthropology is still brooding over its colonial hangover and continue in a state of uncritical romantic self. Far from being senile I am fully conscious that I am writing this for a galaxy of my own anthropological fraternity the world over and in India, without whose priceless contributions, anthropology in India would have been in a state of oblivion today. Nevertheless, I feel, a sense criticality in looking at the empirical

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reality, which is somewhere missing in the current anthropological epistemology, when I look at the burgeoning literature being produced by the anthropologists. I intend to underscore the enigma of anthropological visions and helplessness of the feminist theories that surround the questions of the place of tribal women in India and their empowerment in the present context.

When we scan the vast literature on the tribes of India, it is not too difficult to ascertain that the popular rhetoric on gender relations among the tribes swings between two polar extremes. On the one hand, we have many anthropologists assigning a higher status to the tribal women compared to their counterparts in non-tribal societies. The former are considered powerful, courageous and independent (Mishra 2007: 63). In his study of the Naga women, for example, von Fürer-Haimendorf (1933:101) states, “many women in most civilized 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 positions and personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Naga as savages” (quoted in Mitra 2007: 1206). In a similar vein, Hutton (1921) has found that the Naga women enjoy considerable freedom and high social status. They have the right to choose their husbands and are never forced to marry against their will. Even Elwin (1961) “... alluded to the freedom enjoyed by Naga women and contended that the latter exercised significant decision-making power within their societies” (ibid: 1206). Has this perception on tribal women changed over time? I find that still a section of anthropologists endorse what von Fürer-Haimendorf, Hutton and Elwin had observed half a century ago or more.

For instance, Carrin writes:

“When I think of my own experience with Santal women what comes to mind is an image of strong personalities, who enjoyed life despite its hardships... Unlike their Hindu counterparts Santal women do not have to assert their place in the parents-in-laws’ house, rather their addition to the labour force is highly valued. The young wife does not observe purdah before her parents-in-law ...” (quoted in Misra and Lowry 2007: 282).

The fact that tribal women marry relatively later than the Hindu women, absence of widow burning or *sati*, not much of occupational segregation, no hierarchical family structure with women at the bottom, and the prerogative of tribal women in matters of marriage, child-bearing and divorce, etc. are considered to be on the sides of the tribal women in ensuring them a higher social status. Alongside these findings, recent literature is also replete with longitudinal studies claiming empowerment of tribal women through many developmental interventions initiated by the Government and the NGOs. Formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs), extension of micro-credits, encouragement to micro-savings, girls’ education, eradication of girl child labour, etc. are said to have put the modern tribal women on a different pedestal than their counterparts in earlier generations.

Its protagonists believe that the appointment of the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 1992 and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) in 1993 signaled an integrated approach adopted by the Government for the empowerment of women (Suguna and Sandhya Rani 2007: 305).

Against the backdrop of this popular rhetoric on the elevated status of the tribal women, there has been a parallel concern for their deteriorating economic and social status in the wake up development activities in recent times. As examples, one can cite the monumental works of Walter Fernandes (2005), Geeta Menon (1992), Itishree Padhy (1999), and many others, wherein conversion of tribal women from their state of economic independence to that of economically dependent housewives, mental torture and physical harassment by men at home and at work, and exposure to many non-tribal customs, such as wife beating and dowry payment, are alluded to. Thus it is said, "... [the] gender equation suffers a setback either through several development measures and/or through the process of acculturation with Hindu caste women" (Mishra op.cit: 64).

Looking at these two polar extremes, I contend that gender relations in tribal India have not yet received critical attention that it ought to have. Impressionistic, half-baked and oversimplified assumptions many a times have overshadowed the empirical realities thus producing bigotry ethnographies. I have no doubt in my mind that the tribal women's contribution to the family economy is substantial and the institution of bride price is an index of value assigned to women in tribal society. Yet in more than one instances, she is denied of her due, discriminated against and her social position is denigrated. Therefore, as I have been arguing time and again, it is neither theoretically accurate nor empirically compelling to make a rigid a dichotomy, which I call the Cartesian dichotomy, between 'higher' and 'lower' status of a tribal woman, which is typically connected with the Western scholarship. Contrarily, my contention is that her status is a mixed bag of specificities and complexities, and needs to be adjudicated with a critical vision of a social scientist. Thereby I emphasize on the fact that the tribal society in India offers a critical space to examine gender relations and the theoretical approaches currently available in anthropology do not seem to be adequate for such study (Mishra op.cit: 66). Since time will not permit me to corroborate this argument in great detail, I shall limit myself to only two examples to show how disparate elements co-exist simultaneously in tribal culture with specific reference to the place of their women.

My first example comes from the tribe Kutia Kondh of Odisha based on the empirical data provided by Mishra (ibid.). Kutia Kondhs claim their origin from a woman in the form of the mother earth. Padel records, "Their main culture-hero is a woman or female being, whom some Kondhs call Niranthali, who seems to be a human incarnation of the Earth Goddess" (2009: 1). Every Kutia Kondh village has its own sacred space with a sacred object symbolized either by a stone or a wooden pillar or even a tree in the form of the mother earth or dharni mata. More often

than not this space located at the far end of the village is a dividing line between a Kutia Kondh village from other villages. It is believed that the power of the mother earth is so profound that it protects the village from malevolent supernatural influences. It is customary for Kutia Kondhs to celebrate the *pus parab* or the festival in the month of Pausha (in December) with the sacrifice of a buffalo in honour of the mother earth with ritual sprinkling of the sacrificial blood for bountiful harvest and for health and happiness of the villages.

Kutia Kondhs not only believe that they are originated from a woman and she is the protector deity of their tribe, the shamans for them invariably come from among the women, who are popularly known as *bejuni*. The *bejuni* is neither a hereditary social position nor any mortal selects her. She is blessed by the deities through dreams. The *bejuni* is considered beyond the ordinary by the Kutia Kondh. She is a healer, a medicine woman and a counselor – all in one. She can freely communicate with the gods and spirits and can effortlessly ascertain the spirits that cause diseases or bring deaths in the village. Women, for the Kutia Kondh, have many protective roles wrapped in their myths and cosmological beliefs.

But ironically, when the tribe traces its origin to a woman and women protect the tribe by their ritual power, the Kutia Kondh women are strictly forbidden to approach the place of worship or sacrifice. They engage in drinking, dancing and singing on this occasion, but from a distance. In common anthropological parlance, the segregation of Kutia Kondh women is interpreted as a ritual taboo like those routinely associated with periods of biological pollution, such as menstruation, childbirth and pregnancy. The belief in taboos thus simply transcends biological parameters and is linked to the tribal social organization making their relationship much more complex and multi-directional. The enigma thus surfaces when one witnesses both the ritual power-holding and ritual segregation co-existing among the tribal women that do not comply well with the existing feminist theories of trumpeting male dominance and female subordination.

My second example comes from the Santal women in Northern Odisha and adjoining areas of Jharkhand and West Bengal, as described by Carrin (2007). Carrin succinctly notes, among other things, the simultaneous presence of submissiveness and stiff resistance to male domination by the Santali women in their daily life. She writes that the perception of pleasure (*raskau*) for a Santal is drinking the choicest of the beverages and sexual intercourse. Therefore, there is no strict prohibition on premarital sexuality, and young men and women enjoy talking about companionship, romance and sexual pleasure. This shared intimacy stresses a reciprocal relationship which seems to negate violence. The sexual freedom and free hand in the choice of marital partners notwithstanding, in the patriarchal Santali society images of male violence are too often cast into rituals. Carrin writes, "... when a couple wants to get divorced, they take an oath before the village headman, who will allow each of them to speak. But, to close the ritual, the husband kicks an earthen pot, symbol of his wife, and says 'this pot is now

broken'. The metaphor of violence is echoed in narratives of conjugal violence which, however, do not show women as submissive. On the contrary, Santal women resist male dominance in everyday life" (2007: 283). With regard to the gender relations among the Santal, Archer (1974) is also of the view that between the sexes labour is divided but this arrangement is based not on inferiority but on convenience and propriety. For certain acts, men are more fitted than women. Women cannot plough, thatch a roof or use a leveler. All these actions are recognizable diagrams of the male sexual act. Carrin (2007) further observes that the women are as much the pride of the house as their presence is conspicuous outside the house. She says, "Looking at women anointing their body with oil, or combing each other while exchanging jokes about men, a female anthropologist may feel that in a Santal courtyard young unmarried women are seen as the pride of the house. Young women go to the market to meet young boys, or they visit other villages at festivals. Courtship implies an exchange of gifts, poems and songs. Through the latter, we learn that the Santal girl does not want to be married away and that she will return later to the village where she first met her lover" (p. 282). These examples testify my contention that even within the strict patriarchal codes of conduct the Santal women have ample freedom in many personal and domestic matters. Do these examples sufficiently symbolize either the 'higher' or 'lower' status of Santali women within the ambits of our theoretical models?

In conformity with my apprehensions, in her study of the status of women among four patriarchal tribal societies, Bhasin (2007) observes, "There is a kind of duality observable here. Men dominate in public, in social and religious affairs, and continue to play the role of the head of the family and breadwinner, women enjoy a greater say in their family life, they have a greater deal of social freedom and several of their actions are condoned/tolerated... Here one may say that the public/domestic dichotomy is not the only criterion for determining women's status in society" (p. 15–16).

To add another dimension to this debate on cultural construction of gender and its overgeneralization, Mitra (2007) cites many socio-economic indicators. Mitra aptly remarks:

"Tribal women display considerable heterogeneity in terms of their role and status within the tribal community. The same tribe in different regions may show significant differences in their fertility patterns, educational attainment, labour force participation, and other important variables. This may occur due to migration patterns, different environmental and ecological circumstances that force tribal women to change their modes of behavior and social customs. This can also occur due to the process of Sanskritisation or Hinduisation" (p. 1216).

The micro-macro debate in anthropology is not new that deserves further elaboration here. To conclude, I am inclined to reject a Cartesian dualistic paradigm of assigning either a higher or a lower status to the tribal women vis-à-vis

their men or the neighbouring non-tribal women for the simple reason that their status is entangled in a complex set of specificities and complexities. This assumption leads to the fact that popular anthropological imagination on tribal women in India is far from the lived realities that need a critical examination. I strongly believe that the theoretical models propelled by the assumption of universality of male dominance and female subordination due to the public-private, production-reproduction dichotomy characteristics of many feminist writings across the globe is a real problematic in the context of tribal women. There is a dire need to go beyond the conventional parameters of women's role in domestic economy or their ritual segregation to contextualize the essential principles that govern the tribal social organization. It is no wonder that economic self-sufficiency and structural dependence, ritual power-holding and ritual segregation, submissiveness and severe resistance to male domination may co-exist in tribal societies that require a composite and contextualised analysis rather than a dichotomized or over-generalized analysis. Further, the role of spatial, temporal and cultural variables in the construction of gender literally wraps apart the popular rhetorical presentation of tribal women, which is far from the truth, needs to be cautiously re-examined. I wish, the future anthropological discourses will take precedence over a more dynamic, vibrant and multi-dimensional presentation of tribal women in place of the present practice of tossing between their lower and higher statuses only.

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