

TRIBAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND "HINDU" INFLUENCE

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I.

The social organization of the Adivasi of Middle India is in many ways strikingly different from those organisational modes we have come to know in the Indian civilization. Initially, the outside observer is tempted to express such differences in terms which may include:

- The absence of anything like a caste-system in the tribal world.
- The absence of an influential internal leadership of each tribe.
- The absence of male superiority in the relations between the sexes.

These initial impressions are bound to fade away once a closer acquaintance with tribal life reveals measurable status differences, of which the last mentioned issue, the relations between the sexes, may still be seen in a manner which approaches the egalitarian ideal much more than the other two points.

We do notice marked inequalities in the status of different sections of the tribal society and yet these evident status variations appear to be of a different type compared to those we know from the peasant society. In addition, I think, we should mention a spirit of egalitarianism prevailing in a tribal village and absent elsewhere. But this spirit is falsified by a number of set institutions we are confronted with.

The present paper tries to clarify this ambiguity. It tries to relate what may be called "ideological indicators" in the tribal world-view to the "Great Tradition", and it tries to link the tribal kinship systems with those we know from North or South India, as status is conferred through these systems.

In the process of this work, I hope to show a fundamental unity in the ideological orientation of both societies. If, from an original identity, "Hindu" institutions have been divorced, this was due to the changing relations of production in the plains.

In addition to foreign invaders into India, foreign ideas must have also added to the status differences already prevailing there, and of these I would like to mention the concept of hypergamy which is so markedly absent in the tribal evaluation of affinity and which is at the same time a corner stone of the caste system.

I shall try to explain my position by reference to the work of three esteemed anthropologists who had all very different approaches to the subject but agreed to identify "Hindu" influence upon such features of tribal organization they were unable to explain otherwise.

I shall begin with Wilhelm Koppers and then make a reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss before I finally turn to Verrier Elwin. The first author was a founder of the Vienna School, the second tried to use the Indian ethnographic material for his more general analysis of reciprocity and the third anthropologist was an intimate friend of the Adivasi, less interested in theoretical issues than in the "human relations", as they were documented in his many empathetic monographs. I shall try to point to the ideological bias in the work of all the three authors.

II.

Wilhelm Koppers wrote an influential article on "dual organization" in India shortly before the end of the war. Part of it was referring to Bhil, Munda, Gond and Bhuiya, where he mentioned his own ethnography or recent books of Hoffmann (1930), Roy (1935), and Grigson (1938). All these authors had recognized certain binary divisions they were unable to explain in the first instance. Following Niggemeyer (1933), Koppers (1944:78) decided that such segregation existed because one half was more "hinduized" than the other. He explained how the organization of these halves resembled the one "universally associated with the Hindu caste system" (*ibid* p. 75), and so he identified it as the result of recent processes of assimilation. Koppers mentioned the following examples:

Half of higher social status	vs.	Half of lower social status
"pure" Bhil		"impure" Bhil
Bhilala		Bhil
"lesser" Bhilala		"greater" Bhilala
"little" or "younger" Munda		"great" or "older" Munda
"older" Kharia		"younger" Kharia

Anyone slightly acquainted with the Adivasi will be able to add many more such examples. In the south of the Phulbani District of Orissa, for instance, the Raj Gond explained to me that their Kuttia Kond neighbours were their "senior siblings". There was a status difference between the two tribes. The Gond would consider the Kond their inferiors, and they would manifest this consideration by a reference to the alleged habit of beef-eating among the Kuttia.

For Koppers, this type of discrimination would be due to the relative "Hinduization" of the Raj Gond, and in common sense terms everybody would agree - perhaps even the members of the two tribes concerned.

But I do not think this common sense explanation should satisfy us. For even if the difference in dietary habits boils down to more than just a verbal allegation, it only indicates how these tribes have accepted the specific ideom of the civilization to express status differences whereas it in no way explains the basis of these differences. Matters of diet have of course, been introduced as discriminatory techniques in the last century, but were they absent before? Wasn't at least the concept of commensality engraved in ritual distinctions of the tribes much earlier than the time their "pockets" were opened for the immigrant bearers of new ideas? I shall try to exemplify this proposition by the reference to two institutions of two different tribal societies known for their conservatism.

The Ho of Singhbhum, I was told, call that unit of consanguines MANDI CHATTU or "people who eat from the same pot" which includes all the relatives recognized by tracing back the marriages for four generations. Clearly commensality (and some ritual consequences) is used here as an idiom through which the basic unit of the "own" group is discriminated from the "others".

Similarly Elwin (1950:24) reports from a Bondo village that the neighbours are considered to be "soru-bhai, brothers who have eaten the same sacrificial food" and as such manifest their membership in a "sacred entity". In both cases then, commensal discrimination expresses the omnipresent xenophobia of the tribal world-view.

We need not be astonished if a reference to beef-eating or such habits is easily employed in the modern tribal world. These "Hindu" evaluations have always been present there, so if they are counted as signs of "Hinduization", they can be understood as such only in a very superficial sense. But there are more grounds to challenge Koppers's thesis.

Firstly it seems odd to have this markedly binary mode of segregation in all tribes and on all levels of social organization. The Bhil, for instance, are inferior to the Bhilala, and among the latter the "greater" are looked down upon by the "lesser" Bhilala. We do not find serial ways of ranking but rather various dichotomies at various levels. But if "Hinduization" was the cause for

this discrimination, one would imagine to come across a graded type of assimilation, where a number of degrees would mark an extreme or a more moderate intimacy with the civilization. But such a "historical" picture common sense would prescribe is nowhere to be found.

The regular expression of status difference refers to relative age-distance: "Great" or "small" and the like mean senior or junior in the context of sibblingship: Paired brothers of unequal age at the same time are a symbol of inequality as well as of the prohibition "to exchange daughters" mutually, since this is nowhere permitted. Something like a rule of endogamy emerges, a rule Koppers universally associates with the "Hindu" caste system. But in tribal society, this rule is expressed with a different quality, and there is also another discrepancy to Koppers's view: The status advantage is sometimes with the "junior" and sometimes with the "senior". Had it been the result of some "Hinduization" one would imagine that the discriminatory symbols refer to a unified standard. But as we can see here, the symbol of superiority in one tribes is the symbol of inferiority among its neighbours.

As Koppers himself shows by the Munda example, the "junior-senior" dichotomy extends to the village level. In fact, I think, this is the first level where the natural division of family members has been transformed into an ideological division divorced from biological age. The Munda - just as all the other tribes I know - are subdivided into hereditary dualistic groups of each village which oppose the bearers of names indicating priestly functions to bearers of names indicating headmanship. The former are the "seniors" of the latter.

Now if this division was the result of some "Hinduization", it would mean a neat partition of the alleged outside influence to half the villagers in innumerable cases. Few people would use such an absurd argument. But the very same symbols of segregation are used on a higher level in the very same manner. Why should they be the result of an entirely different historical process on this higher plain.

The Raj Gond (see v. Fürer-Haimendorf 1956:500) and the Santal (see Gausdal 1960:22) are probably the best examples for the weakness of the "Hinduization" thesis. Both discriminate "seniors" from "juniors" in the normal manner but in the first case, the line of segregation runs along the line of phratries and in the Santal case five "junior" clans are said to be inferior to seven "senior" clans. It seems hard to imagine, however, that the forces of "Hinduization" neatly followed the lines of distance between tribal segments.

Like many other authors, Koppers must have been impressed by the apparent lack of inhibitions, the economic equality and the visible carelessness in matters of diet. Such impressions - so very different from those in caste society - may have influenced him to assume ab initio a basic ideological difference to what he understood to be "Hinduism". I believe, such a sub-

jective classification is as wrong as it is common. In the given case it was at the same time quite handy.

Koppers was a member of an important catholic order engaged in missionary activities all over the world. Other members supplied Vienna with ethnographic data and the field work in India was conducted from missionary stations and with the help of locally experienced "fathers". For their type of social and evangelical work it must have been advantageous to polemicise against caste, just as a greater echo could be expected from the tribals if the latter were shown to have nothing to do with caste.

III.

Our second author, Claude Lévi-Strauss, is not quite acquainted with Indian ethnography, as he discusses tribal kinship in the same breath as that of Punjabies and other "Indians on the western frontiers" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:394/395). At the same time he fully supports the "Hinduization"-thesis of Niggemeyer and Koppers, as far as the binary division of tribes and villages into "seniors" and "juniors" is concerned. A little phantasy is supplied in addition.

Coming to the dichotomy at the level of the Munda village and in regard to the marriage rules which forbid the members of one half to remarry into the half they have known to have intermarried with in the last three generations, Lévi-Strauss (1969:426) is initially "tempted to interpret the system as an Aranda system" but abstains from the prospect, as the Munda system "excludes a matrilineal dichotomy" (ibid). Instead his explanation suggests "marriage with the father's sister's daughter" as the "simplest solution" (ibid p.427).

This is a surprising turn in the interpretation, for the author must have read at least in the Koppers article that the Munda prohibit any type of cousin marriage. The terminological pattern similarly excludes any categorical possibility of such a link. But this terminological pattern indicates an identity of alternate generations in all tribal systems, and Lévi-Strauss was acquainted with at least one of these (ibid p. 394). Such an alternation would normally imply some "Australian" pattern, but this our author would not admit at the cost of some embarrassing polemics (ibid p.410). The only other theoretical chance of an explanation then was a "simple solution" in the form of a patrilateral cross-cousin marriage although such a rule is contradictory to everything we know about Adivasi kinship.

The key to the understanding of this rather strange way to interpret fairly straightforward data lies in the admission that the Munda system "excludes a matrilineal dichotomy". Lévi-Strauss (1969:161) had earlier explained the

genesis of the Australian systems as the outcome of the rule of a "disharmonic regime", or the combination of patrilocal residence and matrilineal descent rules. But the Munda and all other tribes of Middle India are certainly not organized by matrilineal descent rules. An "Australian" type of system in Middle India would then have falsified the argument elaborated at length - so it could not be admitted.

On the long run such a "short-cut" cannot last, however. I think it is time to emphasize the existence of the wide-spread phenomenon in Adivasi kinship, the identity of terms for alternate generations. This identity is not just documented in the terminological categories. In an analogous opposition, we regularly find "pure" elders and youths of the village dormitory to handle the ritual affairs, while the impure householders (perhaps combined with the equally "impure" infants) struggle for survival in this world.

The terminological identity is found wherever we begin to look. The Kuttia Kond, for example, equate grandparents and grandchildren while in Ego's own generation, they refer to senior siblings (tada, or elder brother and nana, or elder sister) with the terms for grandparents in the Indo-Aryan languages that must have influenced them. In the adjacent generation, the terms for "mother's elder sister" (or "father's elder brother's wife") are identical with those for "younger brother's daughter" (male speaker) or "younger sister's daughter" (female speaker) whose brother is identified with "father's elder brother" or "mother's elder sister's husband". Further more these terms are even used to design great-grandchildren or great-grandparents. Similar examples are found everywhere: The nomenclature of all tribes (whatever the language used) juxtaposes consanguines and affines on the one hand and adjacent and alternative generations on the other. We find strict symmetry in all the terminological patterns and the differences of age and generation are marked clearly.

As a result, I would emphasize two principles this pattern expresses: Firstly it underlines the distance between seniors and juniors while accepting this confrontation to reappear regularly in a cyclical manner. The juniors of the day are the seniors of tomorrow, so all status differences are temporary. This is stressed by the fact that the seniors of yesterday, as grandparents, are again identified with the juniors of today, their grandchildren.

The second principle identified is the alliance principle. Father's sister is also mother's brother wife in every single terminological arrangement of the Adivasi world, just as mother's sister is regularly identified with father's brother's wife. The categorical symmetry is equally stressed in all the other generations or intra-generational age-sets.

Both these categorical implications are hardly ever implemented "on the ground" however, and this may be a result of some "Hinduization". I mean to

say that on account of external influences from the civilization, the tribal economy, the forms of communication or increased mobility in general required a simplification of the complex tribal forms of social organization. Some principles had to be neglected at the expense of others. We are, in a way, fortunate, however, to have a few systems today in operation, which are still stressing the alliance principle just as much as the one of generational distance. The Bondo of Koraput (Orissa) positively prescribe alliances between sets of alternate generations within the overall framework of two moieties and the Juang of Keonjhar (Orissa) prescribe this alternation in a system that is even more sophisticated (see 1963:142 of the Diss. of Charles McDougal). But apart from these two groups who have both made it a point to ward off outsiders, simplifications (or amputations) of earlier sophisticated systems are the rule.

There are two means to "shorten" the two principles. One is regularly found in the southern zone of the tribal belt (to the south of the Kond settlements). In it the institution of "cross-cousin marriage" shortens the cycle of alliances at the expense of generational distance. In opposition the northern type demands an interval of three generations between two affinal connections of two different parties, and as such it stresses the generational distance at the expense of a clearly visible obligation to maintain the alliance.

The first "simplification" moves in the direction of what we know to be the "Dravidian" system of marriage alliance while the second type comes close to the regulations of North Indian marriage practice, were it not for the rule to renew alliances (Ryuji 1970:385).

So we find simple polities such as those of the Juang and Bondo to be able to maintain the highly sophisticated tribal form of social organization while the more assimilated tribes had to simplify their marriage regulations under growing economic complexity. These two "simplifications" are the two formulas out of which South Indian and North Indian marriage regulations have been developed. So in my opinion, the kinship order of the civilization has evolved out of the tribal order, although in a very superficial sense, individual terms of the dominant languages have, of course, been adopted into the tribal usage.

IV.

If I tried to demonstrate Koppers's biased view of a false opposition between tribal and "Hindu" ideologies, and if I tried to underline the basic unity of the two worlds of ideas by referring to Lévi-Strauss's misinterpretation of crucial kinship data, my last reference to the work of Verrier Elwin follows the same line though it refers to matters visible "on the ground".

I wish to call the notice to people Elwin (1950:21) calls: "degraded missionaries of a lofty faith", who "have imported the Hindu religious ideology and a Hindu eschatology into Bondo culture".

Elwin is speaking of the Dom in the Koraput District of Orissa, and he mentions them shortly under the heading "External Influences" (ibid). In another monograph, he explains their marginal position as weavers, their "agressiveness" and their "superior cunning and intelligence" (Elwin 1955:60).

Now this author is one of the few ethnographers who mentions this category of people at all, although such intermediaries are present in all tribal areas. The specialists of cattle-herding, crafts and commercial credit operations seem to be absent or tabu for all those modern ethnographers, if we leave aside a few exceptions (e.g. Niggemeyer 1964). The fact that the government of India has classified them as "Scheduled Castes" in opposition to the "Scheduled Tribes" has also contributed to this curious divorce. Government reports (e.g. Hota 1979) seem to make these intermediaries responsible for all the economic misery the "Scheduled Tribes" evidently suffer, though they never refer to the equal misery of these petty traders called "Scheduled Castes".

There are two points I would like to make in this context: Firstly, I would challenge the stereotyped reports which maintain the Adivasi are exploited by these so-called Harijan. Secondly I believe the Dom, Pan etc. to be as much aboriginals of the hills as the Adivasi are.

For Elwin (and others even more so) an Adivasi is equivalent to the cliché of the "noble savage", and these are normally people with ancient collective rights in the land and forests, casual concepts of leisure and a distinct fear of or dislike against any type of outside interference. Such a (fairly realistic) position can, however, never be maintained without others who take over the polluting tasks. Who provide the cattle the cultivators cannot get along with, who produce essential clothes and implements, and who are willing to offer credit on such "easy" terms no modern bank would ever dream of, provided the produce could be traded through these intermediaries.

Only such a group of people willing to be polluted by the outsiders could permit the noble savage to retain his nobility. He could indulge in his bloody sacrifices, because the "juniors" would pollute themselves to get sacrificial animals (or humans) from outside and he could drink good rice-beer, because the "juniors" produced the fermenting substances, and finally he could ridicule the cheap characters that came from the civilization, because the intermediaries did the commercial bargaining for him with these outsiders.

The "honesty" every outside observer cannot help but notice among the Adivasi of the hills is a direct result of the fact that Dom or others were willing to take over the "dishonest" but necessary jobs of this world. Only through the

services of the latter, the tribal xenophobia could survive unpolluted. The Adivasi, of course, would be honest enough to admit this and always prefer the trusted relationship with the Dom to the more risky welfare schemes of modern government. The secular competence of the Dom is complementary to the sacred qualities the cultivators have maintained, one cannot do without the other, although, of course, one activity is "junior" in status to the other. The complementary character is documented (at least in the Kuttia Kond area where I lived last winter) by the ritual obligation of one group to partake in the sacrificial meat of the other on the two major festivals of the year.

My point is then that the idea of pollution we find in the "Hindu" civilization is already present as a necessary element of the archaic tribal society, and not a later import. Such an import-thesis can only be maintained by those content with the concept of the "noble savage".

The tribal concept of pollution may, of course, have been expressed somewhat differently: People on the margin of survival do not tend to be very particular about what they eat, though they are (as every observer can tell) quite particular with whom they eat. All tribal rituals demand elaborate fasts to purify the officiating functionary and food in the sacrifice is the method to communicate to the PEN i. e. the "seniors" in the other world.

V.

In conclusion, I would again like to stress that we find the basic patterns of the "Hindu" kinship systems documented in a much more sophisticated form in the tribal society and in tribal kinship nomenclatures. We also find the elementary status opposition: in the tribal society, the opposition which in the "Hindu" society as well separates the "pure" from the "impure", though in the tribal context this idea is seen as the junior-senior dichotomy and never permanently equated with either the "pure" or the "impure" status. Seniors or juniors may be either or on different occasions! The status difference appears in its pure form divorced from a permanent discrimination.

At the same time we notice a primary ideological transformation of the senior-junior dichotomy: Groupings within tribes or tribal villages or the opposition of cultivators and craftsmen are labeled with these terms although they are unconnected with the opposition of biological age-groups we also meet (e. g. in the youth-dormitory).

If we are to pronounce a basic unity of the tribal and the "Hindu" ideological concepts, we must also ask for the ideological differences. Superficially, we

notice a difference of elaboration: Two or three or four status groups in a tribal village (e.g. Roy 1915:388/389) oppose many more in a peasant village.

But there are also qualitative differences: Though traders and cultivators are separated in the tribal areas neither of the two can exercise a marked economic superiority as against the other. Cultivators are "polluted" by economic efficiency and traders may never possess the land which makes their "senior siblings" so independent of them.

Within the village of cultivators, permanently settled "affines" may be excluded from ritual privileges, but they have the same economic rights as the original settlers! Sacred specialists as "seniors" may be respected in their sphere, but the other half of secular leaders does not suffer economically therefore! One group is never forced to work for the economic benefit of the other. This absence of a class confrontation in reality marks the difference between the ancient tribal village and the standard type of peasant village in the civilization. A related type of ritual classification in this latter institution justifies minority control of the means of production.

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