

WOMEN AND GENDER –A CRITIQUE ON THE STUDY OF ‘TRIBES IN INDIA’

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Abstract

The ethnographic accounts on tribes in the form of monographs, handbooks or inventories have been the hallmark of the first two phases of tribal studies in India. It is from these accounts that women's position in tribal society has been mainly worked out. The concern shown towards women in tribal studies is very recent. The earliest such attempt can be traced to the publication brought out by the Indian Anthropological Society in 1978. Both Hinduization and Christianization led to a number of restrictions on the kinds of freedom women enjoyed in the traditional social settings. In case of Hinduization, such restriction was a part of the concern for respectability/ status in the other, it was more to do with religious morals and values. The position of tribal women in the context of all-round socio-economic changes within tribal society has been another area of concerns in the study of women in tribal society. The case of Birhors in Jharkhand, Nathan, for example shows how the high importance of men due to their involvement in the public domain, in this case distribution of meat (prestige food) through society is neutralized by a similar kind of engagement by women through exchange and transaction activities in the market. Tribal communities in India are enormously diverse and heterogeneous. One of the ways by which non-tribals are acquiring tribal land is by marrying tribal women. Hence anything which tends to jeopardize their land and population is seen with a great deal of indignation.

Keywords

Tribal, ethnographic, sanskritization, gender, equality, differentiation, heterogeneous, alienation, indignation, constitutional.

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1. Tribal studies began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Alongside the census, the British officials also made inventories of tribes in the form of handbooks and monographs. These provide mines of information on different aspects of tribal life.¹ Vidyarthi describes this phase of researches on tribes in India as the formative period, dating from 1874-1919. The other two phases are identified and described by him as constructive 1920-1949 and analytical 1950 onwards. The ethnographic accounts on tribes in the form of monographic, handbooks or inventories have been the hallmark of the first two phases of tribal studies in India. They provide detailed information on different aspects of life among tribes. These include aspects such as modes of economic activities, systems of marriage, family, kinship, religious practices, technology, arts, artifacts, taboos, customs, traditions, inheritance, succession and so on. It is from these accounts that women's position in tribal society has been mainly worked out.

While some say that tribal societies generally assigned high status to women, others opine that women's position in tribal society is the same as in other societies. Writing about the Nagas, Elwin, for example, remarks, 'tribal women is in herself exactly the same as any other women, with the same position, love and fears, the same devotion to home, to husband and children, the same faults and the same virtues. Yet elsewhere he refers to Naga women as holding a high and honourable position. They work on equal terms with the men on fields and make their influence felt in the tribal council. He makes a similar observation with regard to the Baigas when he says that Baiga women enjoy an excellent position in society.² They enjoy and freedom and authority, play a leading part in marriage ceremonies, and have a reputation for practicing witchcraft. Among the Baiga there is no clear division of labour between men and women.

The concern shown towards women in tribal studies is very recent. The earliest such attempt can be traced to the publication brought out by the Indian Archaeological Society in 1978. Attempting to bring out a region wise survey of tribal women the publication points out that studies of tribal women are practically non-existent, the few that exist are superficial and inadequate. The next serious and concerted effort to give an account of

tribal women is seen in the publication of a collection of papers edited by Singh, Vyas and Mann in 1988. Since then there has been steady rise in the number of studies dealing with tribal women. The journal 'Social change devoted to its December issue of 1993 a special theme. 'Status of Tribal Women in India'. These recent studies provide a more careful account of the situations of tribal women than the earlier ones. One can see in the works of Mann(1996), Chauhan(1990), Zehol(1998) and the journal Social Change(1993).³

11. Women in Changing Tribal Society

The British administrator –scholars conceived tribes as those who not only practiced animism/tribal religion as opposed to Hinduism but also lived in complete isolation and without any interaction with the rest of the society or civilization. Though the distinction is maintained between tribe and civilization in the writings of Indian scholars, the two are not treated as isolated but in interaction with each other. Yet we know little about the way these changes have affected the lives of women in these societies. Studies on the sanskritization process among tribes do point to some changes. Roy Burman, drawing upon the studies of many scholars made during the 1930s to 1960s, demonstrated how tribes, with sanskritization, are opting for early marriage as a matter of prestige, and discouraging widow remarriage as well as divorce and separation. Mann makes similar observation on the Bhils. The freedom enjoyed by a Bhil woman in the sphere of marriage, pre-marital sex, divorce, access to decision making bodies, etc.. is gradually being curtailed because of sanskritization. In this sense he views sanskritization as a positive influence since it restrains the phenomenon of divorce among them. After all the upper caste lifestyle which those in the lower rung trend to emulate through sanskritization, in principle does not approve of phenomena such as divorce. Interestingly Roy Burman tends to link age at marriage more with the customary practice of bride price than with sanskritization or distance from it. Citing the case of the Hos of Chotanagpur, he points out that it is not uncommon among them for a girl to wait till her mid thirties before she can find someone who can pay the bride price and become her partner in life(Roy Burman 1988:14).With

improvement in economic condition or even sanskritization , it is argued that women workers tend to withdraw from outdoor work in agriculture and allied activities. Observations in the existing literature on the inverse relation between sanskritization/rise in social status and withdrawal from manual labour are cited in support of such an argument. If one takes the case of tribes such as Santhals, Oraons, Mundas and Hos of eastern India, one finds that the withdrawal is more to do with those who live in multi-caste village or its vicinity and where they form a small minority.⁴ More often than not they are migrant population. Further the trend is more to do with well- to- do cultivators than the poor and marginal ones. It is a fact that sanskritisation /Hinduism process has been at work among most of the tribal groups of eastern India for centuries.

Whereas acculturation like sanskritisation and Hinduization led to change of a certain kind among tribal women, the change moved in a somewhat different direction in the context of the conversion to Christianity. Christianity opened up the space for tribal women to participate in religious worship side by side with men, a phenomenon that was denied to them in the earlier religious traditions of many tribal societies. In many Protestants denominations they have been appointed as deaconess, preachers, trustees, etc. they have also been organized into women's groups within churches to carry out social, religious and welfare activities of the society. Christianity as practiced made modern education accessible to women in tribal societies. On the other hand, it also introduced a variety of restrictions in the name of ethics and laws of the church, which went against the kind of freedom that they enjoyed in their traditional social set up. It also set into motion a process of segregation among boys and girls and put a stop to divorce, which was easy to work out under the tribal customary law. Over and above, the gender inequality inherent in the tradition of the Christian churches and denominations reinforced existing inequalities.

Both Hinduization and Christianization thus led to a number of restrictions on the kinds of freedom women enjoyed in the traditional social settings. However in case of Hinduization such restriction was a part of the concern for respectability/status in the order, it was more

to do with religious morals and values. An inherent inadequacy of this perspective is that it fails to capture the variety of changes witnessed within tribal societies.

111. Assumptions in Tribal Studies

The basic assumption is that tribes are primitive, savage and backward. Tribes are invariably represented as half-clad, clad in only leaves and grass fibers and at times, naked. In these representations, women had a more prominent place than men. A study shows that as high as 95 percent of women respondents from the upper caste considered Bhil women as socially inferior to them. The values governing the larger Indian society are however in the process of change. Indeed there has been a paradigm shift with regard to the nature and types of values sought and at work in the post-independence era. The ethos in the era as embodied in the constitution and law is one of the freedom, equality and social justice. With this there has been a shift in the image one had of women in tribal society, especially among the educated and enlightened. Tribal women were shown as having greater freedom with respect to movement outside the home, choice over marriage, divorce and remarriage, access to property and resources etc. This has been done by and large by examining the literature available in monographs with reference to aspects such as rules of inheritance, right to property, enjoyment of freedom, share in the decision making process. The economic burden and work load suffered by tribal women as well as their access to education, food and nutrition, modern occupations, political participation especially in the modern context has still not been given the kind of attention it deserves.

1V. Different phases of Social Formation

The position of tribal women in the context of all round socio-economic changes within tribal society has been another area of some concern in the study of women in tribal society. Their position, involvement, participation, restraint, role and activity in their various aspects of lives have been thoroughly researched. One of the dominant ways of looking at change from this angle is to show changes in the mode of making a living. This is most glaringly reflected in the change from food gathering to food producing or from swidden (slash and burn cultivation) to settled agriculture.⁵ Such transformation has also

been seen as a shift from communal and collective ownership of land and use of labour to private ownership of land and labour. Developments such as these have led to critical examinations of the idea of tribal society as an egalitarian one. Forms of inequality in tribal society in its traditional setting, have been brought under scrutiny. Of these, gender inequality has been highlighted as the most pervasive, irrespective of the stage of their social formation. Studies have shown how in social formation such as food gathering and swidden agriculture, a rigid division of labour was either absent or gender inequality in one was offset by equality in another sphere. The case of the Birhors in Jharkhand, Naithan for example, shows how the higher importance of men due to their involvement in the public domain, in this case distribution of meat (prestige food) through society is neutralized by a similar kind of engagement by women through exchange and transaction activities in the market. Similarly among the Khasis of Mehalaya, the higher status of women in society due to rights of ownership held by them over ancestral property is neutralized by men's hold in society over their decision making process affecting society. It is however not clear if this inequality that Nathan explicates is more to do with shifting cultivation or the institution of matriliney and settled habitation of the population as in the case of Khasis. Men's control over the ritual and public/political sphere is seen to be a crucial factor in the struggle to exclude women from ownership of land (Nathan 1997). Yet the case of the Khasis with their state like institution or Jaintias with a full fledged state institution does not seem to support such an argument.⁶ Women continue to hold ownership over land and the monopolization of hierarchy is still absent among them. In fact some of the serious problems women suffer, such as witch-hunting is traced by scholars to the pattern of landownership in tribal societies.

The myth of gender equality or higher status in tribal societies has also been brought under scrutiny through examination of such issues as customary law in relation to women. Nonghri points that in several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, women are treated as mere commodities whom men could easily procure through financial settlement through bride price, a custom which was originally intended to compensate the girl's family for the loss of an economically active member. It is established fact that the division of labour in tribal

society is based more on sex and age than on rank, hierarchy or occupation. The taboo on women to touch and use the plough in tribal societies has been seen as a way of denying women control over the means of production, that is land. This access to and control over land is however already denied in those societies by the existing customary laws.⁷ The Oraon and the Ho women, who are tabooed from holding plough are already denied access to land by customary laws existing in their societies. Even in swidden agriculture which Boserup describes as a women's farming system, the allocation of plots is made to men in their capacity as the heads of the household through women exercise greater control over the plots after these have been allocated.⁸

V.Social Differentiation and policies governing it.

The process of social differentiation in tribal society has been rooted in forces outside of tribal societies. These included such forces as introduction of private property in land, growth of trade and market, immigration of non-tribes to tribal areas in search of land and employment, spread of modern education, opening up of new occupations, state sponsored programmes and other similar activities. Accordingly social differentiation has moved along different lines. They have either lost land and been compelled to take employment as labourers in nearby quarries, coal fields and the emerging towns-as unskilled/semi- skilled workers- or have had no more permanently/ temporarily elsewhere for work and employment, such as at plantations that were opened up in Bengal and Assam. There have been others, a minority that have been able to take advantage of the forces unleashed by the market and benefits extended by the state for tribes. This has led to differentiation among tribes based on such criteria as education, occupation, income, wealth, assets etc. They have thus been differentiated into such categories as rich, middle and poor besides the landless. This has given rise to a type of class relations that was traditionally absent within tribal societies. Purnalekar in his study of tribes like Dhodia, Chodhra, Gamit and others in Gujrat points out a division between the well to do and the lower strata.⁹ Women of the well off section have come to enjoy certain advantages. The daughters get enrolled in local schools to get pre-primary education. There is a distinct tendency among these

categories to provide them higher education in schools away from the native village. Many of them join professional courses such as teaching and nursing and some even pursue technical courses. They also take advantage of the facilities provided under reservation. Migration to cities for education provides them with opportunities to acquaint themselves with urban ways of living. However school enrolment is low and the drop out rate high among tribal women from a lower stratum. They hardly move beyond the primary level. They are constrained to work as construction labourer's, domestic servants, cart- pullers, scrap-collectors, vendors etc.

Where as social differentiation has been one kind of transformation brought about predominantly by the state policies and programmes, the other kind of transformation that has arisen is the increasing disparity between men and women in tribal society, upsetting the hitherto relatively egalitarian arrangement. The fruits of the measures taken under the constitutional provisions have however been far from even. The unevenness is marked across tribes as well as within tribes, especially as regards gender. The unevenness is marked across tribes as well as within tribes, especially as regards gender. This is reflected in their representation in education, government and semi government employment, institutions of governance, etc. The female literacy rate among tribes as per the 1991 census stood at 18.2 percent as against 29.6 for men.¹⁰ Further, whereas, the enrolment ratio for girls has been lower than that for boys, the drop-out the rate has been higher for girls than for boys. On the whole women have remained handicapped in almost all these new sectors of social, economic and political life.

VI. Conclusion

Tribal communities in India have wide ranging differences among them with regard to language, physical characteristics, demographic traits, modes of livelihood and cultural exposure. The People of India project launched on 2 October 1985 under the auspices of the Anthropological Survey of India enumerated 461 tribal communities of which 174 have been identified as sub groups.¹¹ There is an apparent variation in the

traditional treatment and position of women among different tribes. However women continue to be governed by customary laws and norms. However one of the ways by which non-tribals are acquiring tribal land is by marrying tribal women. In view of the fact that there is a restriction on the alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes, such methods have become fairly pronounced in areas like Jharkhand. In fact Singh refers to the large incidence of alienation of tribal land through marriage with tribal women among the Hos of Singhbhum. Tribal women with such marriages are seen not only as aligning with the dikus but also as conduits of land transfer from tribes to non-tribes. Often after such transactions the non-tribal men desert their tribal wives. Hence anything which tends to jeopardize their land and population is seen with a great deal of indignation. There has been a general tendency among families of mixed (inter-tribe) marriages to take advantage of reservation extended for the tribes. This partly explains why there is so much resentment of non-tribals marrying tribals. Such a phenomena is fairly widespread in Jharkhand.¹² Also a section of tribal society is in favour of property rights in land for women, despite resistance to the same in the name of custom and tradition. In the case of Jharkhand it is argued as per tribal tradition, there is no individual ownership of land. Issues such as these pose the problem of a woman as an individual and citizen on one hand and as a member of the community on the other. As an individual and as a citizen a woman is entitled to the provisions of human rights as well as citizenship, which guarantees individual right to freedom.

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