



Research Paper

Rethinking Tribe and Tribal Cultures

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ABSTRACT

People of the contemporary world pursue a multitude of different interacts have different views about the nature of the universe and things there in, and have different views in how those things are related and how they function. These factors shape the human views in such a way as to make any universally applicable perception of the world order unlikely. One's vision gets circumscribed by the circumstances to which he is exposed it is difficult for a metro dweller to visualize forests and their utility. In spite of these differences there is a common denomination of cultures. Each society has its economic, social and political organizations religious beliefs, rules of marriage and etiquette language and technology. The oxiom is no one goes hungry as long as food is available anywhere within a defined kinship circle

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1. From palaeo-anthropology we have come to know that the world, till about 10,000 years ago, was the exclusive domain of full-time hunter-foragers, who fed themselves with meat, fruits seeds roots and tubers from the forest; and used fibers and skins for clothing and shelter. The end of this period was marked by domestication of plants (agriculture) and animals (animal husbandry); built upon the experience of several millennia, though which the humans had gathered the knowledge of planting the right kind of seeds in the right place, in the right time, and in a right way; storing the seeds for consumption and for future plantation for a right duration and in a right method; together with rearing right kind of animal. Archeologists name this stage of cultural transformation as "Neolithic revolution" (Childe 1936). These two activities "the double barreled acquisition" as Kroeber (1923/1967 690) calls, not only enabled the humans to shed their parasitic dependence on nature to become producers of food; but also ushered an era of social development, establishment of non-forest habitats and non-forest economies. The process was complete in Europe before Ethnography could document it. But in a substantial part of the world the process is still going on; wherein some people, still cling to their hilly and forest habitats; continue to look upon the forest as a safety cover against food insecurity, together with their small and marginal farming as is possible by the geo-morphological constraints of their habitats. These are the people, who have come to be called "tribes".

2. From biology we know that "There are tens of billions of known kinds of organic molecules. Yet only about fifty of them are used for the essential activities of life. The same patterns are employed over and over again conservatively ingeniously for different functions. And at the very heart of life on earth – the proteins that control cell chemistry and the nucleic acids that carry the hereditary instructions – we find these molecules to be essentially identical in all the plants and animals. An oak tree and I are made of the same stuff. **If we go far back, we have a common ancestor**" (Sagan 1980:24)

3. Studies of non-human primates show that there is no clear cut line dividing them from humans. The human ability to learn, to communicate with each other, to transmit learned behavior from generation to generation and possession of social as well as a biological heredity link the Homo sapiens to other mammals instead of separating them from each other. The differences between the humans and animals in all these aspects though enormous are only in quantity rather than in quality. In each of these things, the human condition is such as might logically be expected to result from the orderly working out of tendencies already present at the sub human level (Linton 1936;78-79)

Currently available genetic and archaeological evidence and findings from the study of mitochondrial DNA is supportive of a single origin of modern humans in East Africa (Stringer 2003, Liu et al 2006 Balter 2011)

1. An area specific social history, as of India, also seems to point towards a common human ancestry. For example the social history of India outlined in Manusmrti, we know that the Indian society, to begin with, was composed of Brahmana Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra said to have materialized from the body of a 'Purusa' (Rgveda X.90). Each was named a varna. Initially and ideally, the varna membership was not based upon birth, but on the quality and calling of the individuals in groups (guna and karma; Gita IV.12). Down the corridors of time, the varnas consolidated into isogamous but functionally interdependent groups. Consequently intermarriage among the varnas lowered the social status of the off-springs and led to the formation of new groups, referred to as sankara varnas. Further intermarriage between the varnas and the sankara varnas and among the sankara varnas led to the formation of new sankara varnas (Manu: chapter X). For example the offspring from a sudra father and a vaisya mother is named as Chandala (Manu: X.12). The chandala is a scheduled caste in contemporary Andhra Pradesh Karnataka Odisha and Tamilnadu (GOI 2001: 5,22,47,58). The genesis of the Adi Andhra community listed among the scheduled castes of Andhra Pradesh Karnataka Kerala, Odisha, Tamilnadu (IBID: 5,22,27,47,58) may go back in time to the hypogamous union of a vaisya man and Brahmana woman resulting in a sankara varna called vaideha (X.11) and then between a Vaideha father and a Nisada mother (X.36) the Nisada being the product of a hypergamous union of a Brahmana man and a sudra woman (Manu x.8). The off-spring of a vaideha father (a hypogamous off-spring of vaisya father and Brahmana mother) and a Karavara mother is Meda (IBID 36, 8 and 13) a contemporary scheduled tribe in Karnataka (GOI IBID: 26). The genesis of a chenchu community among the major scheduled tribes of Andhra Pradesh may go back to its chenchu ancestors whose occupation was hunting (Manu ibid 48). The prescribed habitation for Andhra and Meda was in the outskirts of a village (x.36) and their occupation was hunting (x.48). Thus, among the communities listed in Manu, we come across names of social formations what in contemporary times have come to be known as castes, scheduled tribes as well as scheduled castes.

A verse in Vishnu Purana (II:3.1) describes India (Bharata) as one country and one people (Notes 1):

2. Thus most communities in India, tribes or castes, are to be seen as the socio-genetic extensions of the varnas. Sometimes, in its long history, the Indian society assumed the form of a conglomeration of interdependent isogamous groups. Each group came to be known as Jati, as the term varna lost its vigour and was overshadowed by Jati. No Indian language had a synonym for the word tribe till 1950.

3. On all counts, modern science seems to point out towards a common ancestry of the entire human population on earth. Therefore, the classification of humans into tribe and non-tribes has no biological basis. The two-word statement, "**Vasudhyaiba Kutumbakam**" (Notes 2), made centuries ago by an Indian now stands confirmed by science.

1. Thus all human beings as the members of the same species, are physically the same. Individually however, each human being has a unique personality. Human individuals, in spite of such differences, are found to live in groups overcoming their differences; and each occupying a defined position in a network of inter-personal relationships. What binds them into a group, setting them from other such groups, is culture.

2. In simple terms culture means a way of life that is common to a group of people. It is a collection of beliefs and attitudes, shared understandings and patterns of behavior that facilitates harmonious group living; setting a group apart from other groups. Culture is what makes some people Indians different from the Americans; Odias different from Malayalies; tribes from non-tribes, one tribe from the other, or one community from the other. Culture is defined in many ways. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) had compiled 160 definitions of culture and commented on their utility for anthropology. The best definition of culture used in anthropology for more than a century is a Tylor (1891). It reads: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". The definition centers around three interrelated concepts: 'a complex whole' "acquired by man" and "as a member of society".

Culture is "a complex whole", an integrated unit; and just not a series of unrelated things. The parts or traits of any culture, materials or physical or tangible (houses, tools clothing etc) and non material or intangible (art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits) form a whole an integrated unit. All these are based

upon knowledge and belief. They get reflected in the inter-personal behavior of the people of the group to which they belong.

The second part of the definition connotes that culture is “acquired by man”. It implies that culture is unique to the human species, it is learned behavior and that it is not inherited. This is why people behave the way they do. One, born and brought up in an Odia speaking family in Kataka, speaks Odia differently from one raised in an Odia speaking family in Brahmapur or Bhawaipatna. Such differences have no biological basis.

3. The third part of the definition is “as a member of society”. It implies that culture is shared with other members of the group; and learning culture takes place within the group. Thus culture is a group phenomenon of which the individual is only a part.

1. Lives of all living beings, human beings no exception are influenced by their environment – physical, biotic and social. The physical part of the environment involves climate, rainfall patterns, and geomorphologic features. The biotic part includes all plants and animals. The social environment involves interactions with the members of ones own species.

In order to maintain itself to survive, the human part of the environment, in any given area, has to adapt itself to these different environmental conditions. The conscious or unconscious plans of action carried out by the members of a population in response to its environment, so that all parts of the environment remain related to each other in a complex and systematic manner. The plan of action reflects and adaptive strategy (Moran 1979:325 referred to by Howard 1989:8). The adaptive strategy is biological as well as non-biological. They may be short term or long term. When temperature rises, humans sweat. It is a short term strategy. Long term biological strategies involve changes that alter the physical characteristics of a population as a whole. Such changes which occur over generations comprise organic evolution. It is through the process of organic evolution over the past few million years that humans have come to assume their present characteristics.

2. The central mechanism of organic evolution is natural selection. What links the biological changes with the environment is natural selection, a process whereby the best adapted members of a population assume genetic dominance, and are better able to survive and multiply. It is a key element in the adaptive strategy of most species.

3. For comfortable living in an environment, physical alterations are not always necessary. Humans are capable of adjusting their living patterns such as clothing, food shelter etc. and by doing so create a comfortable micro environment for themselves. Adaption to some environments may be easier than others. It may not be always possible to find a likable environment. But culture enables humans to adapt to almost any earthly environment and survive almost anywhere unlike any other organism. The adaptation strategies are the ways that human groups have learnt to exploit particular environments /surroundings for survival and prosperity. They depend on three interrelated aspects of culture namely technology, social organization and ideology.

The most obvious parts of an adaptive strategy are skills and knowledge by which people shape or make things and utilize resources. Equally important are the ways people organize themselves socially. An important social dimension of an adaptive strategy is division of labour according to gender and age. The manner in which labour is divided in a society reflects its adaptive strategy and available resources. The ideological component of adaptive strategy comprises of values and beliefs of a people, an area of culture directing people to follow to go about living in the world, which is not within the observable facts. Interaction of people with the environment is conditioned by their beliefs concerning the nature of universe. The religious beliefs of many communities across the world, particularly those who go by the name tribe, stress harmonious relations with their natural environment. When such communities promote the well-being of plants and animals in their neighborhoods mine diggers and industrialists do not have such concern.

4. People of the contemporary world pursue a multitude of different interests; have different views about the nature of the universe and things there in; and have different views on how those things are related and how they function. These factors shape the human views in such a way as to make any universally applicable perception of the world order unlikely. One's vision gets circumscribed by the circumstances to which one is exposed. It is difficult for a metro-dweller to visualize forests and their utility. In spite of these differences there is a common denominator of cultures. Each society has its economic, social and political organizations, religious beliefs, rules of marriage and etiquette, language and technology.

5. The deterministic role of the environment in shaping culture is universal. Thus any culture is time and space bound. Communities living close to hills and forests supplementing their food baskets by hunting, fishing and foraging develop a world view which prompts them to see themselves united with and inseparable from nature. As an integral part of nature, they feel obliged to maintain the natural order.

1. Are tribal cultures different from other cultures ? Yes, they are in the same vein that each culture is different from the other; since each is a function of its own environment. In spite of differences there are certain cultural universals. Murdock (1945:123) provides a list of cultural traits, called cultural universals, solutions to the problems of living found in one form or another, in all cultures (Note 3).

2. Are tribal cultures inferior to non-tribal cultures ? The answer is an emphatic “No”. for that matter n culture is inferior or superior to any other. A culture is to be evaluated within the context of its own occurrence. Anthropology is indebted to Franz Boas (1858-1942), Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University USA, (1899-1942) for freeing anthropology from ethnocentric moorings; and to take up a position that all cultures are equal, each being a separate unit with its own integrity. Boas asserted that the history of each culture was different. Whatever a culture is like today, it became so as a result of its own development. Therefore, it cannot be ranked against another culture with a different history. Culture is dynamic. Each culture changes over time some rapidly and some comparatively slowly. Some cultures change in response to certain pressure that others did not face. Thus each culture has its own history. Therefore cultures cannot be compared on a scale of excellence in which ranks are set according to the standards of one particular culture. There is no model to which a culture is required to conform. No culture is better or worse or even equal to any other culture. Each culture tribal or non-tribal, has an individuality of its own, and efficient in the context of its own existential position.

3. Therefore cultures cannot be clubbed as tribal or non tribal. Each culture has its community and or geo-ethnic base. However, cultures that go popularly as tribal have certain features which attract appreciation and respect.

- All communities are organized on the basis of kinship, a system of defining and grouping one’s own relatives. It implies that the relationships that are considered important by the members of the group are arranged systematically so that they are regular and predictable. It is the basis of social structure in all societies. **The tribal societies, however are “kinship oriented”**, wherein it is the guiding principle of all social relations. “... it can serve as the basis of economic interactions, such as distribution of food and assignment of tasks; for political interactions, such as the distribution of power over other members of the society;kinship can define the relationship between a group of people and the land they occupy, or the way in which land and other goods are transferred from one member of the group to another. It can determine who may marry whom. It provides the context within which new members are trained in the society’s culturekinship can and does affect every aspect of social behavior” (fried IBID:220-21) among the Karbi of Assam no one goes hungry as long as food is available anywhere within a defined kinship circle (Note 4)
- The influence of plants and animals is clearly discernible in tribal cultures. Most tribal communities regard their physical surrounding as animate. They do not distinguish human-human relationship from human-plant or human-animal relationship. This relationship finds expression in the belief, known as totemism, wide-spread in the tribal world that natural items animate or inanimate are regarded as ancestors. A totem is a plant or animal or even an inanimate object. Groups identifying with them see to it that they are not harmed. The welfare of the group is intertwined with the welfare of the totemic object. This ideology plays an important role in preserving plants and animals in a given area thus maintain eco-diversity (Ratha and Behera 1990). The tribal communities spread over the Andhra Pradesh and Odisha border for example, the Kutia and Dhulia, look upon their physical landscape as a constellation of Gods and goddesses. The hill the forest the river-all are deities. The Naga custom forbids indiscriminate felling of trees. Wood used for house building is not used as fuel (Hutton 1921:190). The Sora of South Odisha never harm edible fruit bearing plants.
- In certain communities agricultural operations and house building are cooperative ventures within the village. When one needs help a person from each household provides a worker. When he task is complete the participants are treated to a drink of rice beer respectfully served by the mistress of the house hold. Among the Bodo Kachari of Assam, the custom is known as Husari (Ratha 1969). Among the Kandha of Kandhamal, Odisha it is known as rida.
- Women in tribal communities enjoy considerable amount of freedom. Among the Garo of Meghalaya a matrilineal and matrilineal community property passes from mother to a daughter chosen by the parents. Among the Khasi and Jaintia the youngest daughter is the inheritress of the household property.

- Children too are treated with considerable indulgence. The Sora custom prevents one to physically punish the child.

Such are the value orientation of tribal communities whom the arrogant ethnocentric English speakers call savages.

Notes :

1. Uttaram yat samudrasya, himadreshchaiva daksinam !
Varsam tad Bharatam nama Bharati yatra santatih !!

(Bharat is the name of the country situated to the north of the sea and south of the Himalayas and its progeny is known as Bharati)

In the middle ages the same sentiment was expressed in the following aphorism of Barhaspathya sastra.

- Himalayam samarabhya yavadindu sarovaram !
Tam devanirmitam deshah Hindusthanam prachaksate !!
2. Ayam nijoparveti gananam laghu cetasam
Udaracaritanantu Vasudhyaiba Kutumbakam

(Mean minded people only perceive differences. For the kind hearted the world is one family)

3. Different kinds of behavior shared by all human beings no matter where they come from
 1. Age grading, 2. Athletics, 3. Bodily adornment, 4. Calendar
 5. Cleanliness training, 6. Community Organization, 7. Cooking
 8. Cooperative Labour, 9. Cosmology, 10. Courtship, 11. Dancing
 12. Decorative Art, 13. Divination, 14. Division of labour
 15. Dream interpretation, 16. Education, 17. Eschatology, 18. Ethics
 19. Ethno botany, 20. Etiquette, 21. Faith healing, 22. Family,
 23. Feasting, 24. Fire making, 25. Folklore, 26. Food taboos,
 27. Funeral rites, 28. Games, 29. Gestures, 30. Gift giving
 31. Government, 32. Greetings, 33. Hair styles, 34. Hospitality
 35. Housing, 36. Hygiene, 37. Incest taboos, 38. Inheritance rules
 39. Joking, 40. Kin groups, 41. Kin terminology 42. Language
 43. Law, 44. Luck superstitions, 45. Magic, 46. Marriage,
 47. Meal times, 48. Medicine 49. Modesty, 50. Mourning,
 51. Music, 52. Mythology, 53. Minerals, 54. Obstetrics
 55. Penal sanctions, 56. Personal names, 57. Population Policy
 58. Post natal care, 59. Pregnancy usages, 60. Property rights,
 61. Propitiation of supernatural beings, 62. Puberty customs
 63. Religious ritual, 64. Residence rules, 65. Sexual restrictions,
 66. Soul concepts, 67. Status differentiation, 68. Surgery
 69. Tool making, 70. Trade, 71. Visiting, 72. Weaning,
 73. Weather control

4. In 1964 October as a lecturer in Anthropology at the Gauhati University I was supervising field work training of a group of students in a village named Pan Ingti Gaonl, near Howrahghat in Karbi Anglon district of Assam, inhabited by Karbi alias Mikir, a tribal community. From our camp in the premises of the Block Development Office, about two kilometers away we used to visit the village, in the morning from 8 am to 12 noon, and in the afternoon from 3-6 pm. One day while helping a student to interview an informant sitting in his courtyard, I saw a middle aged man with an empty basket entering the courtyard. On seeing the man, the informant, the owner and head of the household stood up saluted the person and led him inside the house. Soon after we left for the camp and returned to the same place around 3 pm. As we continued with interview interrupted in the morning I saw the visitor leaving, followed by the mistress of the household carrying the basket (brought by visitor) filled with paddy. As they leave the household premises, she passes on the basket to the visitor, and respectfully bows down. The visitor leaves with the basket.

When we enquired what was all that we came to know that the visitor was an affinal relative. It is customary in the community that one running short of food, goes to a relative with better means, with an empty basket which symbolizes that the visitor is in need of food. One need not verbalize it. The visitor is received with respect, treated well with a good meal. As the visitor prepares to leave the basket is filled with paddy. The mistress of the household carries it and respectfully hands it over to the visitor outside the house and bows down as they part. The axiom is, "no one goes hungry, as long as food is available anywhere within a defined kinship circle".

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