

Understanding Tribal Social Formation of Oraon Tribe in Jharkhand

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In the available literature on the tribes of Jharkhand, particularly in Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana regions, many significant historical and economic facts which have contributed a lot in the social formation in these societies, are either deliberately ignored by the British administrators and ethnographers (Heber, 1861; Dalton, 1872; Hunter, 1877; Risley, 1891; O'Malley, 1910 and Russell, 1916) or less emphasized by the social anthropologists (Roy, 1912, 1915; Ghose, 1916; Elwin, 1943; Ghurye, 1963; Vidyarthi, 1960, 1967, 1969, 1970). These facts refer mainly to the existence of different modes of production, process of class and state formations, changes in social division of labour, and the relations of production and the evolving nature of power relations (Devalle, 1992). These facts obviously have their bearings on the European perception of Indian reality which sees Indian Adivasis as a 'fixed idealized category, it is a perception that divorces tribal societies from the historical processes that have been affecting them, most notably the colonial situation in which tribal studies initially developed. As a matter of fact, a review of ethnohistory of Adivasis of Jharkhand, not only reveals the depth of these communities, their socio-cultural styles and how social maintenance and the attachment to land, territory and kinship have acted as an axis for the reproduction of collective identities but also on the processes of transition from lineage based societies to state based societies (Singh, 1966) or to peasant societies (Singh, 1966; Mandal, 1975, Sharma, 1982) or to societies which may be called as class societies (Sengupta, 1980, 1983; Pathy, 1982, 1988; Devalle, 1992) maintaining at the same time its ethno-cultural styles as well as the changing status of women in tribal society. This review has powerful bearing on the status of women in Oraon society.

This paper focuses on all these historical facts which have affected the adivasi communities of Bihar (now Jharkhand) over a period of time and also reflects on the different viewpoints regarding the status of tribal women.

Historical realities

Major adivasi groups like Mundas, Santals, Oraons, Hos, Bhumij and other early settlers arrived in Chotanagpur region series of migrations (Roy, 1912, 1915; Dalton, 1872; Hunter 1868, 1877). All of these adivasis were mainly lineage based. Their social and economic organisations could be easily explained through the understanding of their kinship structures. Though they possessed no 'organised government' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922), but the political institutions were not entirely absent even during the early phase of their settlement in Bihar, a fact much contrary to many anthropologists' observations on the tribal societies (Macleod, 1931; Malinowski, 1947). Among these tribes, the political roles and offices were linked to the lineage groups; the emphasis was on ritual than political; competition operated between the lineages and the clan or lineage authorities. In the beginning, there was very simple mode of production which may be taken as much familiar to Meillassoux's (1964) understanding of the mode of production in tribal societies. During this period, the position of tribal women was very comfortable; they used to enjoy the status equal to male members in almost all of the matters. Slowly and gradually, different modes of production started evolving among these tribes. The discovery of iron and development of agricultural technology and irrigation, led to an intensive use of land and to economic specializations, social differentiations and regional integrations; as a result, a new mode of production in the fertile river basin appeared (Gupta, 1982). The hill area, on the other hand, because of the terrain's inability for such intense utilisation remained bereft of this development. Perhaps this is the reason that most of the Social Anthropologists have conceived the development in the plain area as expression of 'higher civilizations' whereas in the hill area as that of 'inferior race'. The regional economic identifications were not crystallised until the advent of colonialism, when different pre-capitalist societies were integrated in the capitalist system in various ways. Existing differences were used by British Colonial administrators and isolationist policies towards the adivasis were shaped with rhetorical protectionist intent (Devalle, 1992: 55). Under the backdrop of these policies, stood a history of military repression and economic exploitation of adivasi land and labour in Jharkhand. The process of unequal integration based on the construction of fixed categories (Scheduled Tribes) continued even after the independence. It is during this period, there appeared gender inequality among tribes of India. These facts are presented in detail in the following description of state formation in Oraon society of Chotanagpur region. It provides detailed information on different aspects of Oraon's life such as

kinship and marriage relation, religious practices, division of labour, customs and traditions, rule of inheritance and succession and so on. It is from these accounts, we get the idea of the position of women in Oraon society. It also reflects on the restrictions and taboos they suffer and the rights, privileges and freedom they enjoy.

State formation among Oraons

The Mundas and the Oraons, mostly living in the same region, numbering over a million, constitute two of the most populous adivasis not only in Jharkhand but in entire India. Oraons have always depended upon agriculture, mainly rice cultivation, for their subsistence. They have witnessed, experienced and suffered together the exploitation which they were subjected to and the consequent aftermath of socio-political movements.

Oraons are said to have their original home in Karnatic in South India from where they are believed to have come up the Narbada River settling at Rohtashgarh on the bank of the Sone in the erstwhile Sahabad district. After sometime, they were driven from there and integrated to Chotanagpur. The movement, according to dependable sources, took place in about the first century A.D. Though S.C. Roy devotes considerable attention (Roy, 1915), the early history of the Oraon, prior to their entry into the present habitat of Chotanagpur, the attempt, however praiseworthy, remains of doubtful historical validity (Pandey, 1989: 100). Even if we ignore this account of early history of this tribes, we may safely assume that the Munda and Oraon along with the other tribes led a relatively unmolested life in Chotanagpur plateau for centuries before the British annexed the area from the Nagbanshi Maharaja of Chotanagpur in 1765 (The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. 21: 200).

Oraon's Kinship System:

The order of kinship regulates the state of societies; it refers to structure of reciprocity. The internal mechanisms of kinship such as the formation of groups based on unilineal descent, and the external relations, such as the formation of networks of alliances based on matrimonial exchanges set up and involve social and political relations. The mode of descent-patrilineal or matrilineal- mainly conditions 'membership' in tribal and primitive societies. Therefore, a fuller understanding of these kinship relations may provide us some ideas in regards to women in the tribal society under study.

Mode of Descent:

The mode of descent among Oraons is patrilineal. Every Oraon individual belongs to one descent group formed on the basis of patrification. The physical ties of fatherhood exclusively determined the descent among Oraons. The adoption of a child is also allowed, provided the child belongs to the same descent group. Such emphasis on biological paternity is also found among Pagro Mishing of Assam (Bhandari, 1992) and Mundas of Jharkhand (Roy, 1972). The experiences from Zulu (Gluckman, 1961), Tallensi (Fortes, 1945), The Nuer (Evans Pritchard, 1940) and the Lakher (Leach, 1964), present a picture where the mode of descent is not exclusive and absolute patrilineal as among the Oraons. They are the societies where we confront some links through the women even, despite the societies being patrilineal. It is mainly because of the fact that the physical ties between an Oraon individual and his genitor are conceived as ritually very sacred by the Oraon whose religious policies are based on the cult of agnatic ancestors who are worshipped and propitiated regularly by *Pahan* (religious head).

The Oraons allow adoption but the child must belong to adoptive father's own lineage so that the structure of worship of the agnatic ancestors remains intact. An Oraon woman is free to maintain her relationship with her agnatic group even after her marriage, but ritually her lineage affiliation is replaced by her husband's lineage. It is at this point, we see that an Oraon woman's filial status and ritual bonds change, and she comes directly under the husband's jural authority and the political- jural bonds between her father and siblings (agnates) are finally severed at marriage. Thus we see that the principles of full incorporation of women into their husbands' domestic groups after marriage and the strict adherence to the physically determined affiliation as the basis of the membership of descent groups make the Oraon society a patrilineally organised society.

Lineage, Ancestor Cults and Cultural Organization:

Cooperation among the lineage members is an enduring aspect of reality of the social life of the village. It operates in two forms. When a birth, marriage or death occurs in a family, lineage members must cooperate and participate in the appropriate rituals for the occasion. This type of cooperation may be found obligatory. Another type is concerned with the everyday life and activities in a household. We may term it habitual. At both levels of cooperation, ancestor cults are given a prominent place and the ceremonies carried out with it at every stage of Oraon life, exert a strong cohesive influence because the lineage members realize that they share ancestors

in common who are involved in their fate in this life. The Oraon ancestors, for whom sacrifices are made, occupy significant position in the lineage structure. Apart from the ancestors, there are some unseen forces which also intervene in Oraon affairs.

Therefore, offerings and sacrifices are also made to these forces for being protected from the evil influences of these supernatural beings. We have observed special rites and ceremonies to ensure safety at each turning point of the individual life of each, similarly rites are performed to ensure safety and prosperity to new stage of economic pursuits of the community. I shall now describe the different stages of the life during which the society is shaken by crisis and dangers.

(d) Daily Life

In the daily life the village, mutual cooperation and help among the various lineage houses is also discernible. It has grown out of habitual living together. But cooperation in this form is mostly determined by the principle of neighbourhood. If the lineage members live close to each other (which they do in Badla and Arkosa), they enter into sufficient interaction among them. One may feel free to enter the house of another lineage brother and ask for his favour. Children spend a good part of time together. They play together and when they grow up a little, they go together to the forest to collect leaves and fire wood. The girls dance together and if they are to go out of the village to attend a fair, several girls go on in a group, so is the case with the boys. A woman freely goes to another house of the same lineage and makes use of the husking machine, oil press and mile stone. She may also draw daily water from the well located in any house of her lineage. The general rule is that if a service facility is available in a nearby lineage house, it may be used without any formal permission. Boys and girls of a lineage in Badla and Arkosa are seen to freely pluck edible leaves from their lineage houses without any formal permission of the owner of the house. But in weightier economic matters, a formal permission is necessary. For instance, if a person wishes to borrow the plough or cattle for a few days he will first try to get it from his lineage brother failing which he may approach any member of his clan. As a last resort, he may go to any member of his village. At the time of house building, his approach would be similar. I observed the cooperation among the members of the lineage, clan and village, when the *Mahato* of Badla and Arkosa was constructing his house. The lineage member helped him to bring the posts from the forest, of course the main works of construction were done by the members of his house. In return, he treated the lineage members with rice-beer, and helped them

in agricultural work. The expected group of helpers are most generally from one's lineage. But in practice, whoever can spare time, whether he is a lineage member or the member of the community at large, offers a helping hand if asked for. This form of help will be explained more in details while discussing the Oraon mode of production. However, on all these occasions the help is not obligatory. One may as well refuse a call for help without any loss of face. Securing help from a person, whether he is a lineage brother or a member of the village, depends largely on the cordiality of relation existing between the two persons. But the general practice is that a person while seeking help from another person gives preference to his lineage member than to other members of a community.

Kinship Norms and Interpersonal Relationship within the Network of the Oraon Family

The above analysis prompts us to conclude exactly in Bhandari's line (1992: 136) that the structure of Oraon domestic group is characterised by two principles- (i) the composition of the domestic group is based strictly around a core of male agnatic kins who are genealogically related to each other with reference to common ancestor who provides boundary to its internal structure, and (ii) the patrilocal-virilocal rule of residence which assumes that the male members of the domestic group continue to live with their family of orientation after marriage along with their wives, whereas the female members of the domestic group leave it upon marriage. Thus, the composition of the domestic group is structurally invariant although typologically its organisation may vary at different stages of the developmental cycles. Here, we don't take into account the finer variations of the various dyadic relationships that might exist within the family, for the description will be very lengthy and also irrelevant for our present purpose. If we say that an Oraon father is authoritarian, it does not mean that every father is actually authoritarian. It is rather the Oraon image of the father that we are recording. It is against this backdrop, we shall discuss the position and behaviour patterns of the members of an Oraon family of Badla and Arkosa.

Consanguineal Relations:

Father-son

The Oraon society is patrilineal and the residence pattern is predominantly patrilocal. Actually, the father's role in the household is well defined. In fact the father-son tie and mother-daughter tie form the model for all relationships. Within the family network, which involves person of

same sex but of different generations, the father's role stands for authority, discipline, proper socialization and keeping the family as a cohesive working unit but he is also to meet certain economic obligations. He is the chief provider of the family and he may require the labour of any member of the family in agriculture or other domestic work. In actual practice, the father appears less authoritarian. The Hindu model of man, deification of father and the concept of filial piety are not present among the Oraon. Father and son have a more affectionate relationship between them than among the Hindus. As a child, the son is not subjected to severe discipline, rather he is permitted with permissive tolerance. The childhood is spent more in play than in doing any domestic work. But as the child grows up, he takes greater interest in household matters, namely grazing cattle, collecting *mahua*, leaves, etc. and looking after his younger brothers and sisters. With adolescence he takes up agricultural work, first lighter and then heavier works like ploughing, transplanting and harvesting. When he is a young man, he gradually assumes a role of an adviser to his father helping him to take most, if not all, major decisions, when the father becomes too old for any active work, the son is virtually the head of the family. He thus assumes the role of the father.

Father-daughter

The symbolic nature of the authoritarian role of father becomes more apparent in father-daughter relationship. When she is young and a small girl, the father fondles and takes care of her as much as does of his young son. But when she grows up, she comes under the guardianship of her mother. Here unlike the case of the son, the mother replaces the father. The girl follows the mother in the household and the other activities until she is married and sets up her own family. In the case of a girl, both the mother and father allow her more freedom than a boy, especially in matters of economic responsibilities. Young boys and girls spend a lot of time in dancing, visiting markets and fairs. In a sense, a girl's life begins after marriage when she assumes her family responsibilities more seriously.

Mother-son

This relationship is that of affection and mild respect for mother. The mother might admonish her son when he is quite young but she seldom does that when he has grown up. She could entreat and persuade her adult son to accept her view point rather than force it upon him. On the contrary, when the mother becomes old, she is looked after by her son.

Siblings

Among the siblings, the role of seniority is observed to some extent. The role of an elder brother could be very much the same as that of the father if the difference of age between the two is considerable. Similar is the case of two sisters of considerable unequal age. But two brothers and two sisters of nearly equal age behave towards each other more or less as equals. There is no rule of avoidance between brother and sister. From the nature of the residence pattern, where brothers live closely with one another all their lives (*if not under the same roof*) it may be expected that some strain might appear among them from time to time. The quarrel may become more pronounced after their marriage. But so long as the father is alive, they will burn the quarrel and the father will subject them to his decision. With the death of the father, they might demand the division of property and live separately.

Husband-wife

It is marked by the acceptance of a somewhat mild superior role of the husband. Though at times, the husband names his wife a few nicknames, they usually live in peace and carry out the expected role peacefully. The wife acts not only as the mother of the children, she has also to attend to all domestic duties. Cooking, fetching water and fuel, periodically cleaning the house, husking house and other grains are some of the daily chores she has to attend. During the agricultural season, except ploughing she attends all types of agricultural work. A good wife can have sufficient control over her husband. She may even admonish him for drinking *haria* too much and not attending to agriculture. The husband's authority is further restricted by the fact that wife has the right to divorce him if she finds it necessary. In such a case her *parti-kins* will stand by her. Furthermore, too much maltreatment of the wife might cause a person considerable penalty in the form of fines and loss of face in his own community.

The role of *patri-kins* of an individual in Oraon society discussed above is also defined on the basis of proximity, age and sex of the persons. Their roles are modelled after the roles of equivalent members in the immediate family. For example, father's brother is expected to behave like a father. Like-wise reciprocally, the brother's son should respect and obey his father's brother as he does to his own father. Towards a classificatory brother of a father, the relationship is that of respect and obedience, but to a mild degree. Grandparents on the father's side are also persons to be obeyed and looked after in their old age but the reciprocal relationship is more of affection and love than discipline and authority. A child is treated with love and affection by his grand-

parents and would allow things which normally the parents of the child might forbid. The permissive behaviour continues until it takes the form of mild joking relationship between grandparents and grandchildren of opposite sex. It appears that the grandparents act as an instrument for moderating the excessive authoritarian role of the father, if any. Similarly, a person looks upon his and her father's brother's wife and father's sister's as a kind of mother and gives her more or less the same consideration as due to the mother. The relationships between the cousins are also modelled on sibling relationship. But two cousins of almost the same age can become friends. Sometimes, this intimate friendship between them may be further strengthened through a ritual friendship.

Affinal Relations

Ideally the *matri-kins* of a person among Oraon of Badla and Arkosa stand in the same relationships as prevails among the *patri-kin* of equivalent generation and proximity. For example, mother's parents are treated in the same way as father's parents. But in actual practice, the *patri-kins* form a close residential and descent groups and naturally the interaction is more frequent. In this sense they are closer to the *patri-kins* than his *matri-kins*. For instance, a person's mother's sister is equated with his father's brother's wife and father's brother with his mother's sister's husband. Behaviourally, he should act towards them in the same way as does with his father's brother and his wife. But in actual practice, a woman and her husband treat her sister's children affectionately and rarely subject them to discipline. Reciprocally, they are respected but not feared.

The mother's brother is perhaps the most important of the *matrt-kins*. He has to be present in all the major rites beginning from birth which concern his sister's children. The relationship between a man and his sister's son is based on affective factors, thus a mother's brothers (*MoBr*) has no jural authority over sister's son (*Siso*), and a *Siso* has no right in his MoBr's property as is found in the matrilineal society. The concept of avunculocal residence does not exist among the Oraon because MoBr and SiSo belong to separate descent groups and therefore they propitiate ancestor's spirits who must not be worshipped in the same dwelling unit. Although, a man has no jural and economic relationship with his sister after her marriage and the same is extended to his sister's son, yet a man does have affective attitude towards his sister and her children which is symbolized in his participation in many rituals at her sister's place.

Kinship and Power

All societies in varying degrees are heterogeneous. History adds new elements to them without eliminating all the old ones. The differentiation of functions multiplies the groups that carry out these functions or makes the same groups take on different aspects according to the situation. These various elements may be adjusted only if they are ordered in relation to each other. Politics unifies them by imposing an order and it is the 'ordering force par-excellence' (cf. Balandier, 1970: 78).

In short, there are no societies without political power and no power without hierarchies and unequal relations between individuals and social groups. Societies possessing only a minimal government, or which reveal it only in a circumstantial manner, for instance, tribal societies, are no less bound by this obligation. Power, influence and prestige in such societies result from conditions that are now better known, namely, the relation with ancestors, the holding of land and material wealth, the control over the people through the lineal dynamic and the manipulation of symbols and rituals etc. These practices already imply antagonism, struggle and conflict. These tribal societies possess elementary social hierarchies united between themselves by a dialectic that foreshadow the elementary forms of the class struggle in the more complex societies governed by the primitive state (R. Bastide, 1965; Balandier, 1970).

It is a fact that lineages and kinship, territorial divisions and age groups provide the main fields of social relations among Oraons; but the examples of inequality and the centres of political life are more apparent in most of the Oraon villages. Outside the Oraon system are the castes, religion and *Dikus*. They do not belong to the Oraon kinship structures. They are very much in interaction with the Oraons in the village system and the society around. Within the village system, power is assumed mainly by three different categories of people: (i) elders whose names serve to identify the lineage and age groups, (ii) men who possess prestige by virtue of their material success (in terms of high education, secular ideas and realization of political goals such as MPs and MLAs, etc;) and (iii) the outsiders who most generally control the market situation.

Neo-Elites

The independence of the country gave setback to the traditional power structure in Oraon village system originally based on kinship and lineage relations. A new constitution was drawn up

which aimed to uplift and bring the hitherto backward section of the Indian population including the tribals into the mainstream of the Indian life and society by bringing them under the countrywide social, political and administrative network. Consequently, it had to be done by promoting induced cultural change among the tribals through a number of agencies which ultimately gave rise to various types of emerged tribal leaders under the changed context. Some of them being tribes themselves while the others coming from the non-tribal communities. This changing scenario was pregnant with a special feature *i.e.*, the power was no longer kinship oriented rather its emphasis shifted on the material success of the leaders.

Power Elite due to Economic Factors

There is a category of people in the Oraon area who is in a position of power for economic reasons. Indeed, the additional influence that results from the command over the market situation and commercialised economy (*an outcome of the modernisation process in the area*) expresses this political aspect of situations acquired within the Oraon economy- competition for the place of market-master is one of the forms of political struggle. The difficulties of identifying the political forms are found at this level also, if one considers separately the very apparent connection between the relations of production governing social stratification and the relation of power. Certain economic privileges (*land rights, labour processes, market right, etc.*) and certain economic obligations (*of generosity and assistance*) are associated with the exercise of power and authority. There are also economic confrontations; of the same kind as the Indian potlatch, that test the prestige and ability to dominate, of the chiefs and elders. This point has been well taken up in the discussion of modes of production in Oraon society.

Hence, for the Oraon, political action takes place by means of kinship and lineages, territorial groups, age groups, individual successes and the relations produced by the introduction of the commercialised economy. One may rightly speak of diffused government and of a diffused political life, subjacent to all relations between individuals and groups that is revealed not by specific institutions, nor even by any social forms which it might operate, but by various dynamics of competition and domination, coalition and opposition. The political relations may be reduced to a minimal expression, but it retains nonetheless its characteristic as a dynamic system.

In most of the tribal societies of today, the political structure appears to be reduced to the structures governed by descent and alliance. These political structures seem to resist from being formalized. This generalisation ignores certain specific realities of the Oraon society where the state like formal structures have started appearing, yet the search for the political relations outside kinship seems to yield poor results. Power and kinship are in dialectical relations, hence the failure of any unilateral interpretation. This speciality of the Oraons society prompts us to discuss the issue in the 'Mode of Production' model which may logically reflect on the status of women and state and class formation in Oraon society.

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