

Changing Tribal Life: A Socio-Philosophical Perspective
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Changing Tribal Life is a very important and valuable effort on the path to full communication with the tribal peoples of India. The book is a collection of papers presented at a conference held at the Mahila College, Chaibasa (Jharkhand), on March 21-22, 2002.

The conference concerned "the imagining of the tribe" (Sangeeta Das Gupta, p.15). One author invokes Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*, and one theme of the conference seems to have been the need to do for India's tribal people what *Orientalism* did for Asians: that is, to show that "tribalism" is largely a construct of Western and other colonisers (Asoka Kumar Sen, p.11). As one author puts it:

Perceived tribal characteristics, a body of specific attributed characteristics, were products of a history, a history in the making of which the colonial officials, anthropologists and Christian missionaries had participated from the beginning of the early decades of the nineteenth century... The specific structure of knowledge that was created as a result of their combined efforts was the product of an intermeshing of several institutional and intellectual influences - biblical and evangelical concerns, the doctrines of evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, romanticism and positivism, and the demands of governance and thence intervention. Intellectual moorings, ideological positions and the colonial experience of governance converged and conflicted to constitute the quintessential image of tribe. (Das Gupta, p.16)

In the case of *Orientalism*, the author, Edward Said, was of Asian descent and had been raised in an Asian environment, however Westernised. The fact that the book had been overtly written by a so-called "Oriental" contributed greatly to its impact. In *Changing Tribal Life*, on the other hand, not a single author identifies him or herself as a tribal person; and while two of the authors state that their papers are based on personal fieldwork, there are

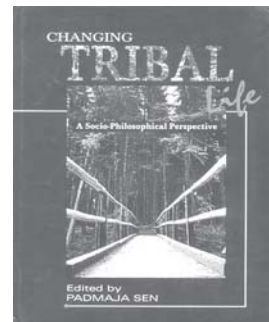
few direct quotes from tribal individuals, and not a single direct quote from a named tribal individual. Rather, there is the statement, "I have now in hand what the people of this tribal land feel" (Debashis Guha, p.110), and claims of seeking to write from "the perspective of the people under study" (Barbara Verardo, p.82). The editor seems to be aware of the problems around representation and self-representation, when she writes: "The need of the hour is an 'acquaintance with the inside views of tribal society.' I would only add that what is needed is perhaps an objective amalgam of both the 'inside' and the 'outside'" (Padmaja Sen, p.viii).

There has certainly been a tradition in ethnographic writings — within anthropology and other disciplines - of omitting mention of the names of individuals among the people under study, for a wide variety of reasons. In the past 20 years, however, this practice has been re-considered, and it seems that a full and open discussion of ethnographers' identification practices in regard to Indian tribal people might be beneficial. It must be remembered that no matter how much tribal people may identify with their tribe and with the forest, they are not just parts of a community and of nature: they are also unique individual human beings, with emotional, intellectual, and spiritual interiors, and with many of the same doubts and yearnings of many other humans everywhere.

One author calls for "the resolution of value-laden practical problems [such as the possible construction of hydro-electric dams] by moral dialogues" (Guha, p.109), and states that ethicists have a moral responsibility to arrange such dialogues. When such dialogues are arranged, they may benefit from avoiding two possible pitfalls: one regarding representation (by members of the group under study); and the other regarding generalisations.

Regarding representation: Scholars must remain aware that one individual usually cannot speak for the entire group. As one author points out, it is often only tribal converts - whether to Christianity, to Sanskritic Hinduism, or to some other urban-based institution, religion, or ideology - who come into contact with, and are able to communicate with, outsiders (Verardo, p.89). Thus, when the above-mentioned dialogues eventually are arranged, the organisers might make special efforts to involve a wide range of tribal people.

Regarding generalisations: If statements - whether by scholars or by the people under study - are meant to convey more than personal opinion, they should be supported with verifiable evidence. And when it comes to scholars, it might be best if broad generalisations, such as the following, could be avoided wherever possible: "The most cherished wish of an Adivasi lies in remaining in perfect harmony and peace with the tribe, nature at large and the supernatural powers" (Sen, p.118).



One factor that makes conversation with traditional tribal people difficult is the language barrier, as tribal languages are often indecipherable to outsiders. However, the language barrier can be overcome through, for example, 1) the cultivation, as translators, of individuals who speak the tribal language, the state language, and perhaps Hindi or English; 2) through the uses of spoken translation, and of electronic-visual translation (such as projecting text on a large screen); and 3) through the uses of the sentence-for-sentence method, and other methods, of alternating between the original and the translated. Developing a variety of effective translation procedures is a cumbersome and awkward process, requiring much patience and adjusting by all concerned. However, I submit that this painstaking effort to translate and present in comprehensible form, whatever languages are called for in the course of ongoing conversation, is absolutely crucial to the task at hand. The effort taken for simultaneous, or near-simultaneous, translation into and out of tribal languages would in itself convey a message of respect for, and interest in, the tribal language and the speakers of that language, and this message might help to lay a solid foundation of relationship that could be built upon in regard to the content formulated by the conversants. In addition, in the translating processes much would be learned about the tribal languages, and language holds many keys to a culture.

A strong point of *Changing Tribal Life* is that it clearly sets out a central phenomena present in the lives of many tribal people in India today: the shift of cultural authority from the local forest to distant, urban-based institutions. This subject is directly addressed in Barbara Verardo's article, and many of the other articles add nuances to the discussion, which posits that there are "opposed sources of legitimacy: on the one hand, the forest, its spirits, and the ancestors; on the other, the State and the 'modern' world" (Verardo, p.83). "Converts conceptualise the forest and its dwellers as being at the periphery and margins of society. So they are shifting their loyalty to the State. They have replaced graveyards with land records as proof of land possession" (Verardo, p.89). Tribal people are "detaching themselves from the forest, both as a mode of subsistence, and as an identity marker and spiritual source" (Verardo, p.91). "The 'new' criteria for social status are linked with the 'new' concept of wilderness: disassociated from power, the 'land of the forest' is identified instead with marginality, ignorance, backwardness and superstition, whereas the 'land of the plains' is equated with 'civilisation,' a space for modernity, sophistication and progress" (Verardo, p.91).

Moreover, in traditional tribal societies, "it is generally held that the knowledge of social customs and beliefs came down from their ancestors to whom it was supposed to have been bestowed by the Supreme God" (Sen, p.116). "They have developed their religious beliefs and practices around their life giving forces" (Mondal Hembrom, p.35). The traditional tribal ritual "preserves the continuity of the mythic experience and in doing so resets the grounds for constituting a home in the forest, which would be impossible without appeasing and pacifying the spirit world" (Ritambhara Hebbar, p.46). However, in modern times, "the centre of life and activities now shifted

from *Sarna*, the natural grove, to the Church" (Chittaranjan Kumar Paty, p.98). Practical terms in which this shift is occurring include ways that the land is used, and ways that people make a living: "Once *sal* trees were eradicated, teak trees were planted in their place, because of their high commercial price and their fast growth. Yet, they do not allow the underwood to grow; so that leaves, roots, and mushrooms almost disappeared from the tribal diet, and wild animals migrated. People would recall those times by saying that they had nothing to eat, because the 'forest was finishing' (*buru chabakerae*)" (Verardo, p. 88); and "it is only among the converts that we find heads of villages, who acted as mediators with the colonial administration, and as civil servants (forest guards and teachers). This allowed for an additional source of income independent from seasonal variability..." (Verardo, p. 90).

"Aryan" and "tribal" are discussed in relation to each other in a number of papers, but there is no mention of the people and culture of the Indus-Valley-based civilisation. For the record, the most popular academic theories in regard to the early habitation of India are: Modern humans came into existence in Africa at least 100,000 years ago. They migrated from Africa to India and Australia, that is, toward the Pacific Ocean. The migrations were complex, and in time occurred both eastward and westward. These so-called Austro-Asiatic people - perhaps they should be referred to as, African-Indo-Pacific people - appeared in India at least 50,000 years ago. The Indus Valley culture - originating, it seems, in Mesopotamia, in the area that today is Iraq - was one of the first of the world to develop urban life. This civilisation, beginning 8,000 years ago, flourished and spread south-eastward, eventually all the way to India. It seems that the Sanskrit language appeared on the sub-continent 4,000 years ago. Thus, the Sanskrit-speaking people came upon a mixture of peoples: those of tribal cultures, and those of the Indus-Valley-based culture. The Sanskrit-speaking people do not seem to articulate the difference between these cultures very much in their surviving written records: instead it seems they often refer to the combination as "Dravidian."¹

Tribal issues largely revolve around land and language. While the importance of holding on to the right to continue to live on the land one has been living on may seem clear, a central - if often unspoken - question of tribal studies is, "why bother to conserve tribal languages and other aspects of their cultures?"

One author in *Changing Tribal Life* writes, "Imagine the sufferings and agony of a community with their independent ethnic identity and unique philosophy of life as they find themselves in the role of a protagonist struggling for their continued existence in a multilingual and multicultural society" (Sankar Sengupta, p.66). Actually, from what I have observed so far in my own fieldwork - with Kanikaran (also known as, Kani) tribal people in south-western Tamil Nadu - many young tribal people today are seemingly not suffering over the fading of the old culture, but rather are eagerly listening to cinema songs on FM radio, and on audio cassettes. At many (Hindu) tribal wedding celebrations, the sole public entertainment is recordings of cinema songs, played on blaringly loud sound systems. The young men

who operate these systems have seemingly become the sole public cultural presenters of the community. It seems that this shift began overtly approximately 20 years ago, around 1980, when the audio cassette player was first introduced in rural areas. At the same time, the great masters of traditional tribal entertainment and ritual - of public drama, storytelling, singing, and drumming - were beginning to die off. Today, hardly any remain, although some of their children do, and some of these children carry, at least in a once-removed manner, much of the old culture. When this generation of people, who are now in middle age, pass on, perhaps 95 per cent of the traditional music and verbal arts could die with them, and thus be lost forever.

It sometimes seems that conservation of tribal cultures is more a concern to certain scholars - mostly people of poetic and romantic natures - than it is to many tribal people themselves, who through their "cultural silence" (Hembrom, p.39) are often seemingly committing cultural suicide. Many tribal people do not seem to have the least concern about the way they are abandoning their traditional culture. Perhaps some of them are being fatalistic about it: it may seem that as this is the way things seem to inevitably be going, why try to fight it?

Can conservation of traditional tribal cultures be justified by reason, by logic? What practical and functional - including money-making - justifications might there be for conservation? Can conservation be justified in the name of cultural diversity? Can the value of cultural diversity be proven? Can conservation be justified in the name of tourism? In the name of learning traditional agricultural practices, including the harvesting of semi-wild edible and medicinal plants? In the name of learning more about consensual and participatory democracy?

Is conservation of traditional tribal cultures desirable? If so, by whom and why? Is conservation possible? It would seem that conservation of traditional tribal cultures can only be possible if tribal people themselves desire that conservation. But why should they respect their traditional culture when the powers-that-be seem not to? If traditional tribal cultures, or aspects of them, are to be conserved, the government and other modern sectors will need to show interest and support. "'Tribalness' ...should be nurtured at the national level," writes one author (Sunil Kumar Singh, p.131). But, even if the political will and the funds are present, a question not explored very much in this collection is, "How can tribalness be nurtured?"

It should be kept in mind that cultures are processes: they cannot be preserved like specimens pickled in a jar. They need to develop and grow, to interact with their environments, or they die. I would suggest that one way to support traditional tribal cultures might be to help tribal people integrate their traditional cultures, with the new urban and electronic worlds. In other words, if tribal people - like most of the rest of the people of India - are in love with the sound of cinema songs (whether Hindi, Tamil, or other), tribal people might be helped to begin their own light orchestras, in which they could, if desired, combine elements of their traditional cultures

with the regional and national musical sounds. It may seem paradoxical, but the road to conserving traditional tribal cultures may in part lie through outsiders expressing interest in those cultures, and through tribal people performing for and educating those outsiders. It may in part lie through tribal people incorporating into their music-making, North Indian-based instruments such as the *tabla*, modern instruments such as the *electric keyboard*, and even Western instruments such as the *guitar* (classical, electric, etc.). Another possible way to conserve tribal culture may be for the government to allocate funds, facilities, or services to tribal elders for teaching tribal children about traditional culture.

A note: In the Introduction, the editor graciously invites assistance from “sister disciplines like history, anthropology, sociology and economics” (Sen, p.i) in the effort to help conserve tribal cultures, but she does not mention folklore. Although academic folklore - which can be defined as the study of traditional expressive culture - is a subset within cultural anthropology, it is also an independent discipline with a unique approach, based on the supposition that it is primarily in the actual making, doing, and expressing of things that culture manifests itself. Folklore scholars tend to focus on observing and documenting actual processes of production and performance, and to keep their theorizing closely grounded in these occurrences, while anthropologists stress the importance of the discovery (construction?) of the group’s overall cultural system. Folklorists may also have something to contribute to the group effort to conserve tribal cultures.

Finally, a word about the title of the collection: *Changing Tribal Life*. This is an appropriately ambiguous phrase, possibly meaning that the book is about how the life is changing (on its own), possibly meaning that it is about how certain people (tribals and non-tribals) are changing - that is, acting on - the life of tribal people. It is indeed a combination of inner and outer conditions that will decide the futures of India’s tribal people.

Note

1. Luigi Lucas Cavalli-Sforza and Francesco Cavalli-Sforza, 1995. *The Great Human Diasporas: The History of Diversity and Evolution*, (Reading, Mass., USA: Addison-Wesley)

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