

Sukant K. Chaudhury

ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY AMONG INDIAN TRIBES: SOME ISSUES

Ethics and spirituality as human concerns have been debated upon since long. They are philosophical issues concerning anthropologists studying tribes as well. On one hand we can correlate both because spirituality culminates into high ethical standards, a strong personal guidance of social control measure and morality taking cognizance of culture, on the other hand ethics and spirituality are different concerns, in the sense, ethics is the guidance to public conduct and spirituality deals with personal well-being. In this paper, the analysis is based on two criteria: a) ethics and research in tribal areas and b) ethics and development practices in tribal areas.

Ethics tells us what is right and wrong, good or bad, fair and unfair, responsible or irresponsible, obligatory or permissible, praiseworthy or blameworthy. It is associated with guilt, indignation, resentment, empathy, compassion and care. It implies both character and conduct of individual and community. It addresses matters of public policy as well as more personal matters. It draws strength from our social environment; establish practices, law, religion and individual conscience. On the other hand, it critically assesses each of these sources of strength. Here ethics and morality are roughly synonymous. Both ethics and morality are linked partly with religion in general and spirituality in particular. Max Weber's intellectual ideas are relevant here. He was influenced through his kin Alfred Weber's ideas that well being is linked with spirituality which is guided by gratification through many ways and specifically with material gains. Every community has its own ways of linking the above. Spirituality has two angles (a) it may remotely deal with religion (b) spirituality is linked with religion. In Indian philosophy, we have the *charvak* tradition; an atheist tradition which did not believe in religion continued its spirituality. However, by and large, most of the traditional communities linked spirituality with religion.

Patnaik (2013) says that anthropologist dealt with ethics intermittently, earlier while researching, and these days in development practice. In fact, the students are always taught before going for a fieldwork, the 'dos' and 'don'ts'.

Ethics deals with the relationship between 'self' and the 'other'. Derrida (*cf.* Patnaik 2013) says that there is no ethics without the presence of other. Quoting Campbell, Patnaik says that ethics has been a problem in anthropology because of its methodological requirements of being non-judgemental, value-neutral, culturally relativistic, and respecting different culture's needs. In this manner ethics in anthropological research became the principal concern of the researcher. Here is worth mentioning the four ethical dilemmas faced by the fieldworkers as observed by Barnes (1977 *cf.* Patnaik 2013): (a) conflict or consensus, (b) commitment and partiality, (c) science or citizenship, and (d) frankness or concealment.

The tribes have been often misinterpreted as 'barbaric community' by the so-called civilized. Even the renowned sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1943) called them 'Backward Hindus'. He went on to propagate the policy of assimilation. It would have been disastrous if the policy would have been implemented. Assimilation is unethical because it attacks the identity of a community. The tribal community merges into the wider community. Ghurye said that the tribals must leave their bad practices like dormitory system, meat eating and drinking of liquor. They should be assimilated into the mainstream of Indian society and culture. But then the mainstream was dominated by Hindu culture. Further it can be analyzed as if other communities are not involved in meat eating and drinking of liquor. Moral policing is always applied on the others and not on one's own community.

The "other's" analysis about tribal ethics is their own construction of non-civilized, barbaric and backwardness, leading to contemptuous descriptions of tribal life. The tribes have their own construction of what is wrong and right according to their own cultural standards. They have their own spiritual discourses. Imagine a tribal man being trained in isolation with long fasts and seclusion for many years to get qualified to perform healings and rituals. He personally interacts with the supernatural and finds divination. The tribals are guided through value rationality. For example, among the Kondhs, the recent ethnic riot has been a sordid story where spiritual standards barged into their personal lives by the 'other'. In such a situation what happens to ethics and spirituality. Will tribes continue with the construction of the 'others' or they should get convinced: "Live and let others live"? The critical issue here is does their ethics and spirituality get recognition of the mainstream and 'the others'.

Going back to the "other's" construction of tribal ethics, they have been termed primitive by imposing certain criteria: honour killing, human sacrifice, female infanticide, poor dress pattern, attributes such as keeping long beard and using loin clothes, not using undergarments, etc. In most of the early monographs, the tribal living has been romanticized in publishing nude or seminude photographs to sell the books and publicized the oddities like tattooing, and peculiar kind of socialization. How these things are going

to be structural if we follow the western anthropological constructs? Further, structure has to be found from within, and not without.

Let us discuss the case of the Tharu of Uttar Pradesh. The Tharu are patrilineal, patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilymnic. Anthropologists have been saying that though traditionally it is a patrilineal tribe, their women enjoy a better status. D.N. Majumdar (1940) says that Tharu women dominated the family affairs. However, control and continuity rested with men. Today reservation has seen Tharu women as *pradhan* of the panchayat. But a woman *pradhan*'s lifestyle has not changed; except for signing a few official papers of the panchayat, most of them without much concern, in fact, her husband is the *de facto* panchayat chief. Sometimes she accompanied her husband with much stress to the Block headquarters for attending meetings. For women, crises like wife battering, many pregnancies, burden of domestic work, extra domestic work (like collection of fuel and fodder from the forest and helping in cultivation and harvesting) continue. Undoubtedly, Tharus are under the influence of modernization and globalization. The development programmes implemented by the Government hardly have taken into consideration their cultural requirements. Culture has been the cornerstone of development for every community. Since long it has been said that needs of the people are cultural. Culture is not fragile, does not change fast. It requires time to change the habits of people, livelihoods are determined with cultural code (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2010). Tharus have been forced to have cash cropping, particularly sugarcane. There are a few sugar factories nearby Lakhimpur Kheri District of Uttar Pradesh. Invariably, the factories have labour problems and political interferences. Interestingly the Tharu continue fishing in traditional style and also follow several traditional rituals and practices.

The Tharu live in midst of forest and today they are facing deep crises because of encroachment as well as loss of rights on forest land. In the name of development and forestation, the government is implementing different programmes and acts, one among them is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also known as Forest Rights Act. Madhusudan Bandi (2013) made a comparative study of the forest dependent community of Chhatisgarh and Gujarat and says that Forest Rights Act has been misused and for the natives of forest land has been reduced to rights having an ornamental value. B.D. Sharma (2004:5 *cf.* Bandi 2013) said that when the Tana Bhagats of Chotanagpur were challenging the British Empire against the proclamation of its right over land and imposition of land revenue, they gave a slogan: 'God created the earth; we are children of God, Pray, where from has the government appeared?' Tribals are facing the crisis of livelihood throughout the country because of the unethical processes of development.

Let me come to aspects of religion and spirituality. For the tribals, supernatural domain determines their living conditions. It obviously indicates

their sustainable human conditions and considerations. Regarding religion it can be said that even today people follow the traditional rituals. For example, among the Kondhs, the principal deity is the earth deity (*Darni Penu*) which is worshiped regularly. Earlier they were having *meriah* (human) sacrifice which has been replaced with a buffalo sacrifice called *Kedu Pooja*. Most of the Kondhs follow other traditional ritual practices. However, acculturation has been going on in which the neighbouring Oriya culture has definite influence. For example, Jagannath temple is found in almost every area and they hold the car festival (*Rath Yatra*) every year. Lord Shiva is worshipped in the area. Besides, Christianity is a major religion; conversion started in early 20th century when Baptist Missionary Societies established its largest station in India at G. Udaygiri in 1993. At present, the Mission has 250 churches affiliated with it. According to Padel, the first person in the area to be baptized was a Dom and his family in 1914. The number grew to 400 in 1930, above 5000 in 1963 and is now about 40,000. Other missionaries in the area include a Roman Catholic Mission (a French mission), and a German Lutheran Mission working in Koraput District (Padel 1995: 188).

Elsewhere I wrote (Chaudhury 2008) that the causes of conversion of Kondhs to Christianity are many. The main reason may be attributed to the dedication and hard work of the missionaries themselves with some much needed activities like school education and hospital facilities (Padel 1995). They also try to change their customs, which were termed 'barbaric', besides making them 'well behaved, well dressed and well groomed'. For instance, the Church rule prohibited consumption of liquor and dancing. A male was required to cut his hair short as soon as he became a learner – a powerful symbol of difference in a culture where men were proud of their long hair. Women are required to wear a tight bodice over their breasts, and are forbidden to get their daughters tattooed. Further, there were some restrictions on sexual activities as well. Participation in the youth dormitories, pre-marital sex, taking a second wife and extra-marital sexual practices are all prohibited. This definitely gave new moralities. School education also provided a code of conduct and discipline quite different from Kondhs' own. Uniformity in dress, short hair, regular bath, a day's rest from labour per week, obedience to parents, good and regular meals, etc., were attractive packages (Padel 1995). Though the missionaries tried their best to convert Kondhs and spent a lot of money in the area, the Kondhs by and large resisted such lucrative propositions. Initially, the Panas got converted. Only in 1950s, Kondhs started converting themselves. Even today the general impression gained in all the villages that the Panas had become Christian and the Christians were inferior to Kondhs.

At present, the Kondh religion, its supernatural domain, shamanism, etc., is in a state of flux (Chaudhury 2004). Due to external pressures such as the dominance of the non-Kondh officials, petty businessmen, politicians and others in the area, the Kondh society appears to be insecure. This feeling has

given way to an organized mood to reassert their traditional tribal identity and way of life. And for achieving this they are seeking psycho-social support from their traditional religious practices, supernatural domain and rituals. The younger generation of Kondhs is, under these circumstances, seem to be having a dualistic religious approach. Even the best educated and well placed among them, while voicing that some of the beliefs in the supernatural are irrational or superstitious, hasten to assert that the *meriah* sacrifice had paved the way for Kondh prosperity and happy existence. The implication is that a return to the past practices could once again resurrect or rejuvenate the Kondh culture. Recently, Kondhmal area of Orissa, became prominent, probably for a wrong reason. Communal riots are going on since 1994 in the area. The social tension continues even today. It has created social, economic and political turmoil in the area and in the state.

The Kondhs are the largest tribe in Orissa and the seventh largest in the country, the population amounting to about 20 lakhs. As per their oral history, they are original inhabitants of the area; hence nothing can dissuade them from asserting their rights. The Pana, an erstwhile untouchable community, came from the neighbouring Bhanjnar area in the 16th century and took shelter in Kondh land. After independence they are listed as scheduled caste. The Kondhs look down upon them and there has been a continuous cold war situation among them. The recent uprising is due to politicization of the whole Kondh land. Conflict between Kondh and Pana, non-Christian Kondh and Christian Kondh has loomed large, leading to the recent riots.

The “other’s” call them primitive. Let us examine in the context of Kondhs, according to the Government policy, two sections of Kondhs have been declared as Primitive Tribe – Kuttiah Kondh and Dongria Kondh. The Government has declared 74 tribes as Primitive Tribe on the basis of a few criteria like backward technology and economy, like hunting, gathering, fishing, etc. Can we really call a tribe as primitive today? Srivastava (2008) raises a question regarding what are primitive traits? He says that the term primitive was used earlier in a temporal sense mainly by unilinear evolutionists. They termed the non-western societies like Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America with an ethnocentric bias by terming them ‘remains’, ‘survival’, ‘social fossils’ and ‘vestiges’ of prehistoric ages, thus the term was used in the temporal sense. Further, Srivastava says that most of the anthropological writings wanted to captivate the reader’s attention through showing the oddities, like showing them as headhunters, tattooed, cannibals, practicing some strangest form of marriage, disposing off their dead, wearing more jewelry than clothes and so on (*ibid*: 30). Most of the anthropological monographs published nude or seminude photographs of tribal people. Such romanticization of tribal community has been going on. Undoubtedly it is unethical as nobody sought their permission to publish it. When we delve into the Kondhs, we find many such traits like shifting cultivation, men moving in a short loin clothes, women

moving without undergarments or for that matter the *kedu* sacrifice (Chaudhury 2008).

Thus, the above discussion leads us to the fact that a democratic process initiated after independence could not inculcate its elements into the people. Red-tapism, corruption and lukewarm manner of functioning by the government officials have produced divisive effects on people. Modern party politics resulted in the emerging ethnic crisis. The underlying point is that people are nostalgic about the ideal structure of their past and some of its elements are still continuing in the form of kinship, marriage, family, economic pursuits and supernatural beliefs. The continuity has been always facing challenging situations with ample choices and alternatives. Now the Kondhs are no more isolated and are a part of the wider society. The emerging ethnic crisis will take some time to reconcile.

Conversion has its own merits and demerits. Undoubtedly demerits are highlighted when it leads to such ethnic riots. As discussed earlier the issue here is if one religion is changed, does it change the social structure? Though religion is changed, economy, kinship and culture does not change. The society is undergoing through many dynamic processes of change. As anthropologist, we understand that change in structure is mainly found in simple and traditional societies like the Kondhs. Radical change or change of structure does not happen in many cases. Change in structure implies small changes to cope with changing processes of modernization and globalization.

As said earlier, tribals are natives of forest; their livelihood is dependent on forest and water resources. Though the 'other' looks down upon them as primitive yet their system of cultivation and social cohesion are extremely sophisticated. These systems have sustained them for centuries without overusing their resources unlike the mainstream path of development. So to destroy these cultures in the name of development is unethical from the insider's perspective. The 'other' should endeavour to build their indigenous knowledge which the tribals have developed and maintained with great care (Pedal and Das 2010). Most of the big dam projects and heavy industries have displaced them causing cultural genocide leading to a tearing apart of their social structure including economic system, kinship system, religious system, material culture and power structure. Further Pedal and Das wrote that the Kondh area is full of bauxite mines even it is named as Khondalite by the geologists T.L. Walker. The economists view the area as unutilized resources but for the Kondhs it is 'livelihood resources'. The mining of the area would definitely mean that the area will be deforested and land will lose its fertility, people will be displaced facing all kinds of tragedies.

The Kondh today is a dejected person who is facing a loss of cultural identity as well as individual identity, because of the interest of 'the other'. Most of them are organized to revive their own traditional practices and rituals.

After the 1994 riot, their leaders have started writing the history of Kondhs as autochthones of the area, some of them started developing a *kui* script. Thus Kondhs would not like to do away with their tribal status. Besides the scheduled tribe status gave them some benefits.

In this manner ethics on the grounds of development, culture, economic organization, political organization, cannot be dealt with the “other’s” perception for any community. The tribal’s identity question is of much significance. Since time immemorial they have been suffering. Today in globalized and democratic India, they must live with a sense of pride. They should feel that they are recognized in the history of making of India as a nation. Therefore, ethical issues both in research and development should be of prime concern both to researcher as well as agencies.

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