

## SHORTER NOTES

### NOTES ON SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIA'S HUNTER-GATHERER STUDIES

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Several new developments deserve the full attention of anthropologists who are concerned with study of India's hunter-gatherers. First, there are new ways of achieving time perspective on those cultures already studied. Second, there are techniques for eliciting valid information from taciturn subjects—even at this late date—and these promise to be of assistance in future data collection. Finally, third, there are ways that will help us to understand existing bodies of data that we might otherwise have simply dismissed as too incoherent to analyze. I refer to these developments as “significant” because they promise to advance either what we are already doing, or what we might wish to do.

#### **Achieving time perspective on India's hunter-gatherers**

Since last year, there have been two sweeping studies of hunter-gatherers in the Indian peninsula, each using a different approach. I have found myself saying of P. K. Misra's *Tribal Heritage: An Overlooked Chapter in Indian History* (2017) that 'it should be mandatory reading for students of Indian society' and that it 'summarizes a lifetime of the author's own thinking on the subject' of India's tribal peoples from the earliest time to the present. The value of the book lies in its extraordinary breadth. Misra goes back to the peopling of India, to tribes in ancient Indian literature, to the domestication (presumably by forest people) of elephants in Harappan times, to the burning of forest by the Pandavas, to today's government programs. Virtually everything that has to do with the forest bears in some way on the occupants of the forest. When the book challenges us to avoid thinking of the forest as a separate realm until recent times, it reminds us that most of our models of the past really are overly simple. What Misra has done then is to broaden the parameters within which we need to think of our subjects in the past.

The other development is a paper by me that, while conceptually broad, covers the variables more selectively and focuses specifically on South India (Gardner 2016). Let me mention here too that I join those who refer to hunter-

gatherers as “foragers”, because there may be fishing and hunting is commonly unimportant. My presentation style also complements Misra’s topical approach, for I deal with the materials in time sequence rather than topically.

DNA studies tell us that the region’s foragers have been in India from as much as 66,000 years ago, tens of millennia before the entry of other peoples (MacLaury *et al.* 2005: 1036). It should not surprise us to learn then that, despite some inter-marriages, they are very distinct genetically from India’s general populace (Cordaux 2004, Cordaux, Aunger, et al 2004). I have seen a former Indian soldier among them, but the settlement was certainly not composed of mere runaways. Their earliest acculturation experience in India, i.e., cultural change “when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact” (Herskovits 1937: 259) would have taken place when food producers entered the peninsula and began to take over land that was potentially arable.

The chronology of differentiation of Dravidian languages suggests that their speakers dispersed throughout the southern peninsula only several thousand years ago (Gardner 2016). Foragers must have had substantial contact with the newcomers, to have learned to speak Tamil, Malayalam, etc. as completely as they did. Trade of practical forest products was a likely aspect of this contact and the foragers cannot have been as shy then as they were later. I say this because there are only limited traces of their earlier tongues (as seen in their vocabularies and verb grammar). It bears mentioning that what neighbors view today as mistakes in foragers’ use of kin terms are not due to confusion, but rather to selective borrowing of culturally relevant Dravidian terms (see below). This period of contact, with learning Dravidian languages, would have constituted a second round of acculturation.

When sophisticated states formed in the South Indian plains just over 2000 years ago, with their well armed and vigorous battling armies, hierarchic societies, status consciousness, and hunger for prestige trade goods, these would have been unwelcome challenges. They are likely to have been what led the foragers to edge away into deep forest and resort to shyness and silent trade at best. We have seen peripheral tribal people retreat like this from complex states when in search of a more independent and less harassed life. Sometimes they do it cyclically, as in northern China, Southeast Asia, Morocco, and South America; it is a familiar process. Let us hypothesize that this retreat constituted a third round of acculturation.

Since the arrival of Europeans, India has had a bundle of complex changes, that ended up with the establishment of British bureaucracy, construction of hill stations, modern transport, management of forests, etc. These impacted India’s southern foragers in diverse new ways.

Even without going into this recent time period in any detail, we can see that there had to have been an intermittent series of distinctly different

acculturation experiences for the foragers, that did much to alter their lives. Understanding foragers today requires knowing all this, because there are residues of earlier adaptations in recent times. We can no longer assume, for instance, that shyness has been a perennial cultural trait of theirs, as also trade in forest goods (Gardner 2016).

### **Eliciting valid information**

The goals of ethnographers are, of course, diverse. But, for those who seek to learn the concepts and ways of thinking of their subjects, fieldwork with South Indian foragers is especially challenging. One source of problems is that outsiders, with only a few exceptions, customarily treat them as subordinates. They are extremely aware of this and it has thus become natural for them to respond in a guarded way. Nevertheless, two ethnographers in particular, Seetha Kakkoth from Kerala and Daniel Naveh from Israel, have made it clear how easy it is to get past this barrier and achieve open, informative communication with foragers. They both do this by approaching those with whom they work in what foragers interpret as an open, quiet, respectful, and natural manner. Both have provided us with accounts of how they conduct their fieldwork (Kakkoth 2014, Naveh 2014). These illustrate well how they earned trusting responses and were able to obtain valid information. Let me say more about each of them.

Kakkoth has worked with three different foraging peoples in Malappuram District, Kerala, just to the west of the Nilgiri Hills. She kept a low profile even when attempting to understand why students run away from residential school or why they “steal” school light bulbs. Their lives slowly became an open book to her. She walked with children into forests or tribal settlements that were plagued by destructive elephants and even slept on rocks in the river if safety required it. I believe that humility has been central to her approach.

Naveh’s research with Nayaka, not far from Kakkoth’s work sites, was also done by keeping a low profile. He focused on male children and spent long periods of silence as he watched one of them learning from observing his father, then experimenting. He, like them, learned largely by watching.

The last thing either of these researchers would do is start asking a series of questions that would be meaningful primarily to fellow anthropologists. In other words, what these two have to pass along to us comes directly from the people themselves and it reflects the foragers’ preoccupations, not ours. What higher goal could we have? In other words, they do what we all might do if we could put away our interest in acting as “professionals”, such as sitting in chairs, working certain hours, making appointments, behaving briskly, using jargon, and having assistants at our beck and call.

It is clear that, if we are the ones who make needed adjustments to *their* routines, it becomes possible for us to dig wild yams, hunt mole rats and

wild boars with them, or even participate in honey collecting. Interviewing foragers about their activities, especially about the social aspects of the work, teaches almost nothing. The “flavor” of their life is lost.

### **Understanding the seemingly incoherent**

Let me focus on a problem in kinship. It is a subject area in which anthropologists play formal games and often lose sight of what those we study might actually be thinking. It is well established that patterning of kinship terminology generally makes sense in its social context. South Indian foragers are surrounded by people who have either patrilineal or matrilineal descent and their terms for kinds of relatives are structured accordingly. For them, uncles, aunts, and cousins are either within ego’s line of descent or they are classed as relatives by marriage. This distinction is taken for granted by South Indians; so, when they encounter nearby foragers, who have, over time, become speakers of a dialect of the local language, one of their first observations is that forest peoples are making innocent or childish errors in their kin terminology.

Apparently, what their neighbors are unaware of is that the foragers all have one of the standard forms of bilateral descent, which anthropologists have come to call “Eskimo”. In not having lineal descent groups, the foragers see brothers of both parents as similarly related to them. The same is true in regard to their parents’ sisters, and the same again with relatives who are called cousin, nephew, or niece. This is done in English as well. Native English speakers equate relatives on both sides as the foragers do for they too lack lineages and have kin terminology of the Eskimo type.

I have surveyed literature on the social structure of a number of the foraging cultures in South India and find them handling kin terms in precisely the same way from culture to culture (Gardner 2014: 234-6). If they are simply making sloppy or childish errors in kin terms, how strange that Malapandaram, Paliyar, Kadar, Nayaka, and Chenchu—who are hundreds of mile from one another—are making precisely the same so-called errors as one another. The reason should be clear by now; these are not errors. The terms in question are patterned in a way that accords with the foragers’ kind of social system. As for how the people themselves think about it, anthropologists would be making a big step forward if we noticed that the pattern is symmetrical.

It is important to point out, however, that Bird-David has gone a big step further when she showed she has actually penetrated through to their way of thinking, an achievement we should all be attempting to accomplish. A woman she was interviewing told her,

“If my husband refers to a certain woman in our immediate environment as ‘sister’, I also refer to her as ‘sister’; she becomes ‘our sister’. Similarly, spouses share a perspective on the objects they frequently use. . . . If my husband

uses a knife that he had before we started living together, and I now frequently use this knife as well, it 'belongs' to my husband, to me, and to 'us'" (1994: 596).

The rationale for the woman using what Bird-David refers to as 'aggregative notions' came directly from the Nayaka woman herself. This should be a lesson for us that we may be stopping prematurely when we merely identify a kinship system type in an aloof, abstract way.

These various developments will probably only have significance in the long run if we give them serious thought now.

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