

Review Article

SOME NOTES ON THE BAIGA

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This short article drew its inspiration from Anubhav Das and Srishti Mandaar's *Baiga* which is a welcome addition to the literature on tribal communities, particularly because coffee-table (or pictorial) books with good quality photographs on individual tribes of India are hard to find, since they are not done with the same degree of regularity as are done the publications on a group of tribes (such as the Naga) or the entire state (like Rajasthan). Coffee-table books are principally sold for their photographs and the accompanying description. The photographs in this book are good, but their captions come towards the end. The reader has to wait for the last pages to know what is 'happening' in the photographs. Furthermore, the captions are too short to make an impact on the reader. Also, the pictures are mostly of the people, useful for a study of their physiognomy and tattoo marks. They hardly cover the material culture of the Baiga, however in the background of these pictures, one may gather some understanding of the structure of their huts or their material things. Photographs of their activities – like life cycle rituals, agricultural operations, festal occasions, ritual performances – and the modern institutions – such as schools, post offices, dispensary, council houses – are to be seen nowhere.

Let us now come to the text of the book. It is simple, straight forward, and familiarises the reader with the contours of the Baiga life. At places, it documents the changes that have come in their lifestyles. The distinction that the text makes between the 'old' and the 'new' Baiga is useful. It is not just a matter of age stratification, but also of two contrasting systems of thought. The 'old' are also called *purana* (old), *sayana* (wise), and *asli* (pure, unadulterated), each of these words conveying different meanings. The underlying idea is that the old people are the treasure house of time-tested, traditional knowledge. Since they possess and value this, they are wise and pure. For instance, the 'old' Baiga women are unexceptionally committed to the practice of tattooing, for the non-erasable designs it causes are 'eternal'; when after death, the woman would leave everything in the world, like all beings, what would go with her to the world hereafter are her tattoo marks, the 'permanent jewellery' on her body. The Baiga are silent on what would go with men to the next world. For 'new' Baiga women, tattoo does not have the same meaning. Their jewellery is different, so are their thoughts on the 'world

after death'. In addition, a booklet of 1982 on the Baiga noted that the women of this community also believe that the tattoo marks keep them healthy (p. 6).

The 'new' Baiga are not diametrically opposed to the tradition, for being the members of their society they have acquired it, but they are more inclined to acquiring the knowledge that has come to them through schooling, because it would greatly help them in adapting to the outside world, and thus maximise their life chances. The likelihood of a conflict between these two streams of thought exists, and the important question is how it is resolved or allowed to remain in suspension. The point is that such differences of opinion are likely to prevail in other communities as well. The old may be dubbed as obsolescent, whereas the new may be welcomed as signalling a bright future. In such situations, one of the potent sources of change lies in the inner contradictions between the two batteries of thought – the old and the new.

The book tells us that the Baiga are a Scheduled Tribe and a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), inhabiting mainly the states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. They do not lead an isolated existence, as has been the belief about tribes in general. They are not cut off from the 'mainstream', so to say. The Baiga believe that their ancestral couple (Naga Baiga and Naga Baigin) gave birth to two children. The progeny of the eldest devoted itself to agricultural pursuits and came to be known as the Gond. The second child went to live in forests and was called Baiga. This would explain the cordiality of relationships between the Baiga and the Gond, for after all they are the children of the siblings. The tattoo artists are all Gond women, rendering their services to the Baiga. The reciprocal relations of the Baiga with other communities like Agaria and the Kabirpanthi Panka have been going on for years. A study of the system of relationships between different communities of the region would remind anyone of the working of caste, thus breaking down the traditional distinction between tribe and caste according to which tribes are isolated from the other communities, whereas the caste is a system of interdependence between different communities. It is a notable fact that the mythical kinship between communities performs the function of uniting these in a common whole, thus attempting to neutralise any skirmishes that are likely to precipitate between them because of the limited resources in their environment on which each community would try to lay its hands.

The Baiga are well known in anthropological literature for the respect they have for the 'mother earth'. When I was with them in the villages of Baiga Chak in November 1987 (article published in 1991), they repeatedly told me that even when they had been forced to plough their land, they would like to give up this practice of food production at the earliest, since ploughing, they believed, amounted to 'lacerating the breasts of the mother earth'. Verrier Elwin recorded this belief of the Baiga in his book of 1939. Those who ploughed the land were terribly under the fear that the forest deities and spirits, animated as they were, would turn against them for 'dishonouring the mother of all' and

cause inexplicable and incurable illnesses and heap misfortunes on them. Before ploughing the land, they sought forgiveness from the 'mother earth', because if they did not till the land, they would produce nothing and die of hunger; and if they clandestinely practiced shifting cultivation (*bewar*), they would reel under the wrath of the forest guards. In their exemplary innocence, they requested me to convey their demand to Shri Rajiv Gandhi, who was then the Prime Minister of India. They claimed to be growing twelve crops those days with their uninhibited practice of shifting cultivation. Since they had been compelled to shift to plough cultivation, they said they had lost all interest in food production, all the aesthetics that were associated with it remained unobserved, yet they had to do it for their survival.

The distinction they were making was between 'carrying out an activity with interest and involvement' and the 'other with a routinized engagement'. Plough cultivation fell in the second category. At no point in this transition from axe-and-hoe cultivation (another name for shifting cultivation), were the Baiga taken into confidence. Neither were they told in engaging terms the demerits of shifting cultivation. Most of these discussions remained confined to class rooms and seminar deliberations, rather than the scientific finding being disseminated to the people who really mattered. The people should have been apprised of the inability to support a soaring population with shifting cultivation; also, of the ecological changes taking place in their habitat, shrinkage of land available for cultivation because of the development programmes, particularly afforestation, and the incremental changes occurring because of urban-industrialization. Nor were they given some preliminary training about the use of the plough and its repair, in case one of its parts broke or demanded replacement. It is well-known that the success of change varied in direct proportion to the confidence the people acquired in new technology and correspondingly were changed their beliefs and thoughts. Extraneous impositions are less useful. They have larger chances of being rejected as people are unable to develop affinity with these. For people, these changes are not their own, they do not gel with their social life, they are alien, and they think that a strong probability exists that the things coming from outside are likely to be discarded in course of time, and when I spoke to them in 1987, the Baiga held the same views about plough cultivation and thought that hopefully one day they would be able to return to their traditional method of cultivation known as *bewar*. However, some of them, the educated ones, know that once plough cultivation has received the approval of the state, the possibility of going back to the past is remote. With a couple of school teachers from their community I held a long discussion on the demerits of shifting cultivation and I could notice that they were catching my points. My submission is that people will definitely understand the administrative and scientific views provided an effort is made to initiate a dialogue with them.

Societies are not impervious to change. It is wrong to assume that

tribes are anti-change and anti-development. What they are firmly opposed to is a kind of change that ridicules their society and culture, often throwing their elements into tatters. When they find that they have been dwarfed by the changes – being forced upon them by those who consider them superior to the local people – they either reject these, and if they cannot do so because of the structure of dominance, they succumb to these uninterestedly. This is the juncture when they start losing their zeal of living, often thinking that the traditional culture, which they always held in high esteem, has not been able to provide a panacea to the modern ills.

That was the reason why a Baiga teacher, who was a winner of many awards from the state government, told Professor T.C. Kattimani, the Vice-Chancellor of Indira Gandhi Tribal University (Amarkantak), that he was least interested in safeguarding the culture of his tribe, because it was incompetent in ensuring his people a respectful and decent living in the contemporary world. He expressed his displeasure over the demand of the state to keep his culture alive, to make dedicated effort to preserve the songs, dances, and folklore of his people, for showcasing their cultural heritage to the visitors and outsiders, who want to see them ‘frozen’ as the ‘relics of the past’. The Baiga teacher agitatedly told the Vice-Chancellor, who in turn shared it in his lecture at Bhubaneswar (organized by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs) on 9 May 2018, that he would like to see the death-knell of his culture before his demise, because today it was only for ‘entertaining the outsiders’, in return for a measly payment, which was highly insufficient for their bare minimal survival. The Baiga teacher was hinting at the commodification of culture – ‘culture to be sold in ethnic shops and fairs.’ Anubhav Das quotes (p. 20) from the interviews conducted with the local leaders, one of whom has ‘worked to showcase the richness of their culture to a wider audience’, and the other who travels with his troupe and has performed in different cities in the country. One of them feels that the ‘young generation doesn’t seem too interested in [our] traditional songs.’ In other words, the traditional culture is losing its sheen; and to keep it alive against all odds is an ‘expensive affair’, which people have now started realizing full well.

The book says that the ‘Baiga follow Hinduism.’ In fact, the ethnographic accounts of tribal communities clearly show that each tribal community has its own complex of sacred places and rituals, which is a motley of natural symbols and imagined entities. As a result of acculturation, the tribes have gradually acquired some elements of the religious practices of the outsiders, depending upon the congruence of these things with their social structure, and assimilated these with their existing practices, customs, and rituals. It is for the convenience of the outsiders (including the census enumerators) that the tribes have described them as Hindu, or since the option of ‘tribal religion’ was not available to them, they were forced to classify them in one or the other religious category as a result of which the identity of their religion (known

by different names, such as Gondi *dharmā*, Koya Punem, Adi, Sarna, to count a few) was completely eclipsed under the shadow of one or the other religious appellation. On this issue, the tribes have protested as well, demanding that a category of 'aboriginal religion' should be added to the list of religions that are recognised. Some tribal activists have also counted the number of tribal religions to be more than eighty, each having its own constellation of characteristics. At one time, the tribespersons did not protest against their inclusion in one or the other religious category, but now with the rise of ethnicity – and a feeling of 'we-ness' – they have become acutely conscious of their identity and the need to fortify their religious system as promoting their individual religious identity, which may be acquired by their future generations. Religion has been an important institution defining the identity and separateness of a community.

Das' book correctly notes that the Baiga are regarded as the best 'supernatural specialists' in the entire region, specializing in extending a cure for the cases of witchcraft and sorcery. Respectfully they are called *gunia* ('one who is blessed with an attribute [*guna*]'). I heard on many occasions during my fieldwork with the Baiga that the *gunia* would never indulge in any nefarious practice, causing illness or death (of humans and animals), or destruction of property. What they did is what in anthropology we call 'white witchcraft', employing the supernatural powers for beneficent and useful objectives. The *gunia* used to say that they do *dharam ki seva* (a 'righteous duty'). However, the latent aspect of their practice is that it is also reinforcing the people's belief in the existence of witchcraft, the malicious acts which evil powers are believed to carry out through human agency. It is well-known that each year hundreds of cases are reported (several of them going unreported) where people (particularly women) are tortured (and even killed) for allegations of practising black magic. Therefore, it becomes extremely important that the *gunia* need to be counselled and their help is sought for battling with the menace of witch beliefs.

Further, the *gunia* may be advised to restrict their practices to herbal medicines. For the latter, whichever help they require from the departments concerned with alternative medicines should be made available to them. The write-up on Lal Sai, a *gunia*, in Das's book tells us that he has intimate knowledge of more than sixty herbs, some of which he received from his grandfather and some has been the result of his own investigations. He claims to have cured more than a thousand cases of affliction (p. 22). The knowledge of such experts should be recorded, because there exists a strong possibility that this knowledge might come to an end with their demise, as the educated Baiga might not carry forward this tradition. Many institutions (like Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sanghralaya, Bhopal and Anthropological Survey of India) have already started holding the consortiums of tribal healers who come with their medicines for display, and while they are at job, the researchers interview them. Our understanding is that once a dialogue is established with

them, and they know that their knowledge is being respected and sought after, they would also look at their practices closely and censoriously, particularly their beliefs in witchcraft, and expectedly would greatly assist in eradicating those from their society. The anthropological point is that people should be empowered in the process of development so that they are able to examine their own cultural practices critically, and be not the slavish followers of their tradition.

Under the auspices of 'The Tribal Fund for Documentation and Conservation', the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) has done a commendable service in 'centring' the tribal people. One of the principal aims of books like this is to familiarise the wider world with the lives of people who have been marginalised, occurring nowhere in our conceptions and discourses. Anthropology is unswervingly committed to these communities, understanding them in holistic terms, and actively working with them for the amelioration of their lot.

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