

Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies. Volume Five, Concept of Tribal Society¹

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Reviews Counterpointed by Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera

Reviews of a multi-comment format are helpful indeed, since a number of facets can be articulated beyond individual preferences and experiences. In our reply we can also mention some of our past intentions omitted in the book itself. The common experience of both editors was that Indian anthropologists had been able to gather comparatively poor information about so-called tribal peoples beyond the South Asian subcontinent and meager knowledge about Indian tribes anywhere outside of this country. We tried to assemble contributions by and for anthropologists all over the world and put them into print within the technical limitations both of an Indian publishing company and of the editors, neither of whom are native English speakers. With this background perhaps the multiple defects of the volume can be explained, and yet we are happy about the replies from several sides.

Tribal societies do, of course, present a “diverse array of socioeconomic, socio-cultural and political processes,” as Van Arsdale points out, and today they must also be understood in view of the respective agencies of the state. The impact of the latter differs, however, and so do the reactions to administrative efforts from the outside. In India, the British colonial government simply noticed the cultural and economic differences of some people compared to the world of caste and, in 1937, created the label “Scheduled Tribes,” which was inherited by the independent state. Then there are “Scheduled Castes” and “Other Backward Classes,” all based upon evasive criteria. Quite a number of South Asian peoples would be called “hunters and gatherers” in anthropological jargon, but “tribes” by the government, and some “Other Backward Classes” share most of their culture with neighboring “tribes” who, in turn, have clients in their villages marked as “Scheduled Castes.”

Stoffle rightly asks about the value the term “tribe” provides for the concerned people themselves, and our answer must again be evasive. The derogatory meaning the Indian caste society has attached to “tribe” stands in sharp contrast to the pride Afghan or Arab leaders attach to their tribal background. Some “Scheduled Tribes” of India proudly accept the status of

indigenous people, although historical evidence cannot be provided, while other culturally similar people forsake state benefits in order to not be included among the minorities (or discriminated-against outsiders) of the country.

Since neither editor specializes in American Indian cultures the contributions as well as the reviewers’ opinions on the North American cases are most helpful for comparison. We would even encourage American specialists of applied anthropology to visit India and vice versa, since comparison rests upon common, as well as different, cultural elements. One obvious difference is the quantitative issue. For all practical purposes, about 100 million Indians live in so-called tribal societies, whereas the American Indian population is much smaller. Another point is the relative autonomy of American Indians due to tribal sovereignty. As Ruppert notes, Suzuki’s contribution on the Winnebago indicates court procedures within (and beyond) the reservation, while nothing of this sort is noticeable in India. In the large central region of the subcontinent an ecological border may roughly subdivide the tribal population into: 1) those mutually intermingled tribes of the high plains where mining and industrial settlements have brought in numerous outsiders and subjected the locals to arbitrary police measures; 2) the high plains without minerals and outsiders where locals of various cooperating tribes – without chiefs or clear boundaries – quietly settle their own affairs, since the police operate only in cases of “public unrest”; and 3) the forested mountains without outsiders and police where territorial acephalous clans, bound together in separately settling tribes, fight out their disputes in minor wars or settle them under their own rules since the police are always and entirely absent.

Religion is another issue we fail to elaborate upon in the volume. Hinduism goes without a circumscribed creed and knows no church or membership rules. As a result the tribal people may call themselves Hindus or avoid the label, and tribal ritual may gradually adopt – or avoid – Hindu ceremonies or approach them halfway. Those who have retained their autonomy

continue to practice the great give-away feasts, not unlike the classical ones known from the North American Northwest Coast or Highland New Guinea. We have witnessed great sacrifices and mortuary rituals where more than 160 buffaloes (or immense wealth) were given away within hours, or where large memorial rocks were erected by those who sponsored vast feasts of merit. All this has nothing to do with Hinduism and is prohibited wherever the police and the majority community have taken over.

Other sensitive issues we do not mention in the book refer to tribal alcoholism and sex in India. Hindus or Muslims of the lowlands observe various degrees of prohibition in these fields. Liquor and other intoxicants are consumed by large sections of the population in a camouflaged manner, since open alcoholism would lead to absolute social boycotting. Similarly, marriages are arranged by elders and premarital and extramarital relationships are strongly condemned, even though (again illegal) prostitution flourishes. The latter is unknown in the tribal world where “elopement” of lovers (married or not) seems to be a regular feature. Such tribal “immorality” or “promiscuity” is elaborated at length – realistically or not – in the weekend editions of the newspapers, just as alcoholism is the first topic Hindus learn about in the tribal culture. In tribal communities, indeed, liquor is not hidden. Men and women make it a point to become intoxicated on sacred as well as secular occasions. Shame or remorse is simply absent. But such issues are not to be mentioned in Indian academic literature. Culinary and marital codes are highly sensitive political concerns of the majority community.

We hope our volume encourages comparison of worlds beyond the dominant Western one. Enjoyment has been ours in preparing a combined response to the views of the three reviewers, David Ruppert, Richard Stoffle, and Peter Van Arsdale. We thank them for their

criticism and encouragement, and we thank Larry Van Horn for arranging and introducing the multi-comment format and Deward Walker for thinking of it and publishing it.

Notes

1. New Delhi, India: Concept Publishing Company, 2002. 424 pages: introduction, two sections, seventeen chapters, bibliography, index, notes on contributors. Cloth, \$38.00 U.S.

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