

Reflections on the Status of Women in Tribal Society of India

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Abstract

Gender differentiation is always considered in determining the status of men and women in human society. Among the tribes of India, women are also always looked upon as women. But they are socially treated equal with the men, though in some segments, weightages are given to the position of women on grounds that they happen to be the generative base of human race. In Matriarchal society, offsprings are named in accordance with the traditions of the maternal side. Disregard to the maternal side is held to be the disrespect to the heritage of mankind itself. A man cherishes deep obligation to the maternal side and in this tribal culture in India has a solid anchorage. The Mundas, the Kharias and all the southern propels of India still cherish the ethical validity of mother cult, which they consider to be the fountain head of the flow and continuity of the tribal culture in India. According to some, globalization has dealt a blow to the traditional view of the tribal women and has degraded them to the position of commodities.

Key words: Tribe, women, female, child, marriage.

Introduction:

The tribes in India do not consider the women as a special group to be treated specially and differently. Like males the females are at par with all categories involved in various activities of the tribe. Whether in economic field or in domestic life, the women are held in high esteem to the men. Similar to the traditional view of womanhood in India, women are considered to be a counterpart of man – a being out of the rib of man.

Basically tribal women are viewed from the perspective of Motherhood, that is, an entity to propagate the generations without economic dependence on the menfolk. What they do regarding procreation is simply receiving the semen from men and nothing else. They conceive and let the baby grow in his womb even without family and outside family bond, sometimes, giving an impression of immaculate conception. Recently, of course, the independent identity of womenfolk is being challenged.

It has been found that the women employ countless tactics and methods to attract members of the opposite sex- tactics in which cosmetics, clothes, ornaments,

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dancing and singing may all play a part. Courtship before marriage is permitted but not on the condition that the marriage would be solemnized. Pregnancy during the period of courtship is not condemned. On the contrary, it is glorified on the plea that the offspring is the gift of the divine. Marriage in the true sense of the term, is a contract even if it ritualized. The contract may be broken at anytime and a second spouse may be taken, giving the impression that the womenfolk has the liberty to act according to her own will and convenience. Female autonomy is the hinge of the family system of the tribal people of Eastern India.

Tribal Concept of offspring:

The female autonomy amongst the tribes is so predominant in character that the women declare before the society that the offspring born outside the wedlock is an object of immaculate conception. Dr. Jyoti Sen, in his article on the status of women among tribes mentions "she has a say in the selection of mate, provided it is in conformity with the marriage rules of the tribe. There is hardly any stigma with regard to divorce, remarriage of a divorcee and social sanction prevails with regard to intimate relationship between a tribal maid and youth which may or may not lead to marriage. Among the Naga and Mizo women their opinion counts at the time of the selection of her mate."

Economic Life and Tribal Women:

The women perform an important role in the economic life of the tribe. For example among the Birhors of the Hazaribag district, collection of roots, tubers and fruits which constitute their staple food at certain season is essentially a women's job. The women accompany the men when they go out hunting and take part in trapping a small game like rabbits and jungle fowls. Their task is to carry net and clubs and they also participate in beating. Among the tribes practicing agriculture, be it shifting cultivation, be it wet cultivation, felling of the trees in case of the former and plugging in case of the latter, woman participate in different agricultural activities. Women play a major role in the making and marketing of rope.

Among the hill kharia, husband and wife work together harmoniously. The nature of relationship between husband and wife, sometimes, appear enigmatic, because on the work field husband controls the behavior of the wife. In domestic arena, wife plays a sovereign role and the husband acts as an assistant of the wife. In the agricultural operation Kharia women do not participate. Kharia women do not participate in ploughing. Thrashing is done but very occasionally. These two operations require the involvement of manfolk. But in other operations, as for example, transplantation and harvesting, the major work is done by women. Men help them by carrying the seedlings from seed beds to the field and harvesting paddy

from field to the thrashing floor of the farmers' house. In the field of manufacturing various types of handicrafts, women contribute immensely in fashioning fishing traps, making bamboo stick and preparing bamboo stripes for weaving bamboo mat.

The proverb prevalent among the scheduled castes relates – “meyloker ekdin kasta, purushder shatdin”, is completely absolute among the Khariar. But in general, the pattern of the male female relation is that the women equate males with authority and power. In the cosmic order of the Kharias if examined gradation of symbols in the same manner is noticed. Dharma as the supreme deity is symbolized as a male. The spirits (Deota) which control the vital area of food supply and welfare are conceptualized as female.

Role of man in the creation of offspring:

Among the important tribes of mixed heritage, as for example, amongst the Koch and the Rajbanshi of North Bengal, it is held that in the birth of the child man plays no part at all. It is believed that the spirit of the ancestor enters into a woman when she is either dreaming or in a placid state of mind during bath. Normally the ancestor on the mother side descends on the female as a new baby in the womb. Sex is treated solely as a pleasure to be enjoyed and it is accepted that young people, both male and female, may experience as many partners as they wish.

The Northlanders believe that new life begins with the death. The Baloma, one of the two spiritual parts of the man, survive death, ascends to an erratic paradise – a land of eternal youth and beauty, of dancing and love. But when tired of the pleasures, the spirit returns to earth and enters a woman to become a human infant. There are various ways for it to enter the women's body. One is through the head, another spirit who appears to a woman in a dream is believed to collect the Baloma from the sea (where it has been swimming) and to place it in the dreamer's head. Blood from her body rushes to the head and the body descends it to womb. It is also believed that the spirit can enter a woman through her vagina as she is bathing. Father, here, is thus believed to play no part in the formation of the new child.

Father is, thus, regarded as having a minor social role in relation to his own children. This concept of the predominance of motherhood has led to an insignificant position in inter personal relation between male and female. In India the overall idea about conception is surrounded by myth and invention. In preliterate societies explanations in which sexual intercourse plays no part at all are not uncommon. A child is often believed to be the incarnation of ancestor spirit which enters the womb of the mother to be reborn, thus excluding the father from any real biological role. Interesting examples of such belief are found among the aborigines of Australia and among the Trobriand Inlanders of New Guinea.

In South Australia children are believed to originate as Muri or spirits from two mythical mothers on the sky, which fly down to earth like tiny butterflies to feed on the nectar of gum tree blossom and sleep under its bark until they choose a mother. If a woman has several children it is because she is popular with the Muri and regarded by them as suitable.

In Western Australia men are allowed a small role in conception. Through chanting and the strategic placing of green twigs between certain boulders, they stimulate the tribes' silver-haired spirit children, the Yulanya. They persuade them to leave the boulders where they originate to go in search of a desirable mother. When they have made their choice the Yulanya wait until the woman is out of her guard and enter her body to begin life as a human being. The little spirit are so small that they can only be seen by the Medicine men, who it is believed, some time help them in this quest for a desirable mother.

The tribal women in India, particularly in West Bengal, are not exemptions in respect of the above belief. In the social backdrop of active interplay of various superstitions regarding the birth of child, menfolk have virtually lost all importance in the life of men, except in the field of economic activities. It is like that women are the spiritual companions of the men in the life in the world and in the life beyond death. Women are separate entities with immense physical property and spiritual potentialities.

Men should, therefore, have no passion towards women and considers their female counterpart as associate only during leisure. Emotional bond between males and females is misnomarised and becomes tantamount to a crazy mind that is developed in a state of nervous imbalance of the man and woman during sexual intercourse.

A pregnant women's life is bound up in an elaborate system of taboos and rituals intended to guard against miscarriage, a deformed child or a difficult tragic birth. Girl from Trobiand islands is dressed for her first pregnancy. She will now be ritually bathed and anointed and wear a special mantal to shade her from the sun. This keeps her in a white condition in order to make her soft and fertile.

Necessity of male associate:

Most preliterate peoples acknowledge, of course, that male associate is required for bringing up child on the Earth. Many other tribes hold that conception is the result of the fusion of a man's and women's blood. The New Guiana people, however, beat the women in order to fasten the child in her womb after copulation. Every where there is a firm belief that mothers blood contributes immensely to the growth of the fetus. Therefore the child's blood is believed to belong to its mother.

Inclination towards the mothers' side is so prominent among the tribal people that it would not be unnatural to conclude that women enjoy special position in society as well as in family.

Before celebration of any function at the selected platform which is known as Akhra in the tribal zone of Bengal, Virgin Nude has an important role in its sanctification. The prestigious position of the girls in the cultural life of the people indicates respectable status of the women in the tribal society of Bengal. Gupi and Kanai, two characters in Vaishnavic cult can be worshipped on Earth only when virgin nude clean their seat or wash it with cow dung water. Akhra is the symbol of the cultural life of the tribal people. The sun god is appeased if the Akhra remain ready for social and cultural performance.

Every head of household cares for his wife is thing for family matters. Traditionally Santal women are equal to their men both in rights and privileges, They are equally respected and has equal responsibilities for contributions to make in the Santal society.

In the society of the Mundari people living in Ajodhya hill, it has been observed that extramarital relations of the women are profuse in number. This is not at all rebuked by the husband unless the matter goes in excess. In case of decline of the women to live together decree is given to the wife without delay. This demonstrates that the Santal women are not down-trodden. In social functions also, equal and active participation of male and female make the occasions more lively and gay.

Authority of women:

If we turn from eastern tribe to western tribe, particularly towards the polyandry society we shall find that women play a very important role in maintaining integrity in family life. By her own tactfulness and polite behavior she can maintain the family peace. If her intelligence and balanced and impartial behavior and cleverness are ineffective, the House hold would suffer from trouble and conflict among the male partners would continue. In that case on payment of her money (compensation) both parties earn right of remarriage.

Women in tribal belt in Rajasthan enjoy special authorities in their family and economic life. Among the Minas and the Damors the women's engagements are no less in number. She hardly find time during day to relax. The Minas and Damors females work in the agricultural field also and Felling of wood, sowing, weaving, reaping thrashing etc. Sometime it would appear that the entire rural economy flourish only under their supervision and guidance only.

If we turn to Nicobor Island, we shall find that women plan the principal part in the farming activities that provide the main subsistence to the people. Much of their

time is spent in tending the gardens and coconut plantation. Their food chiefly consists of grated coconut, banana, papaya, stemmed taro and other starchy tubers. Animal protein is obtained from pork, fowl, wild birds as well as from sea food like fish, crab, turtle and octopus. All the sources of food are tapped in planned way by the women. The male folk remain in most of the time idle in domestic sphere. Except in the avocation of hunting in the forest particularly in collecting game like wild boar, men are scarcely found in the field of economic exploitation. The Nicobari women are very much selective to choose their spouse. Unless able bodied, a man cannot be allowed to mix with a woman for the purpose of procreation. The weaker and the diseased are considered to be social garbage, sent to the community as a curse for any unknown sin committed in the previous birth. The women never allow them to be associated in their life in begetting and rearing children. It is interesting to note that the women of Nicobari Island consider sex not as an instrument only for procreation but for other purposes like joy and comfort in their day-to-day life. According to them animals cohabit once in a year because of the purpose of reproduction but human beings unite with opposite sex for social integration, love, joy and comfort in the day-to-day life.

In spite of the fact that the women have a predominant place in the society, the origin of a child is traced from patrilineal tradition. It has been observed by the anthropologists, there is a close knit patrilineal society and hence the opposing interests are represented by the patri of either side. Bride price is very heavy amongst the people.

In respect of marriage betrothal ceremonies take a major part when the children attain the age of puberty that is about 12 years. He or she gets betrothed and it is held that partners would live a life long co-operation between them. In case of disruption of the union, village panchayat tries to find out the cause and the offender is heavily punished.

An opposite scene is observed in the area known as Lalung of Assam valley. We find the women of this region to possess less important position. The situation would sometime appear very confusing. Anthropologists have stated that Lalung represent a co-existence of matrilineal and patrilocal residence. The clans are matrilineal and the residence which was matrilineal is now tending to be patrilocal. The girl gets a share of the parental property but has to take elder's permission to sell any portion of the property. When Lalung girl marries a non-Lalung, she may continue staying with him in parental house. Then in political life the Lalung women are not rendered any special position of importance, though of course, the female line is given importance because the sister's son is preferred as a chief.

In short, the women of the tribal are primarily subordinate to the men and in no way surpass the social prestige of the menfolk. Strict vigilance of the men folk on the conduct of women are noticed. Women are subjective to various ritualistic taboo.

In north western India, in Kinnor district, the women are considered as the most important economic asset. They are the most valuable economic resource in the area. They work in a farm-house, collect leaves and timbers from the forest. Except in hunting the Kinnor women participate in all spheres of economic activities. In domestic life they are the supreme and overshadow the opinion of the menfolk in every cases and events of family life. Very interesting to note that in private relations women sometimes become aggressive in extramarital affairs. According to them bringing forth the child is the primary objective of human life. For this purpose women can resort to any activities whether approved or discouraged in the society. Sometimes clandestine movement of the women is also praised if it results in the birth of healthy child.

North western India is the paradise of female supremacy. It is here and perhaps the primeval area where motherhood is adored as the original power of the universe. In the folk song it is held that the Hindus worship the female energy through the images of Durga, Kali etc. From North West India perhaps the concept of women's supremacy has originated. Amongst the Kinnors the traditional system of marriage is polyandry. It is believed in tradition that unless women co-habit with more than one male, she is incapable of bearing child which is an offence in the society. At present the women is wedded to several of brothers with whom she is to spend her life. The common wife does not find it difficult to satisfy all her brothers as division of labour in the society demand some one to get away for a long time.

In Chhotonagpur there are seven tribal groups, such as cower, khairwar, kodaku, korwa, nagasia, pando and pradhan. Tribal women are very hard working and take up productive functions on field and forests. The productive functions of these tribes are associated with the collection of roots, tubers, twigs, flowers, fruits and other eatables from forest. The entire collection is controlled by the womenfolk. Some times some children come on the field to assist. Household jobs like cooking, spinning, rearing of children are all done by the women. Among the cower, khairwar and Nagasia agriculture is the primary means of subsistence. Except felling traces, all other mores of agricultural pursuits are practiced exclusively by the women. Arrangements are seen to co-habitat with a young girl in order to reinforce good understanding amongst the old and the new. Sex is not the instrument of production. It is held to be a medium of social and cultural intimacy. Through sexual activity a girl is uplifted to the status of a matured woman when she is permitted to build up a family. World renowned ethnologist, Atkinson, have stated "strange as it

may appear all through the Bhutia tract the inclination and will of women appear to have greater weight than are common in the East both in regard to marriage engagement and in the subsequence domestic management." Another anthropologist Lal has pointed out that the custom of divorce is very scarce amongst the Bhutia people. A woman may mix with different male outside the marriage bond but the husband has no right to claim divorce on grounds of unchastity. As a matter of fact, there is no word in dictionary which indicates a state of unchastity amongst the women. The women share equal status with the men. In spite of this situation women are normally avoided in social activity. Girl child are considered burden. It is because parents are to pay heavy bride price during marriage. In several villages there are Khup Panchayats that prescribe stringent rules of the marriage of the girl. It is for this rigidity the womenfolk are considered to be the liabilities of the society.

Bars before the women:

Women are debarred to form their own norm regarding marital life. They are to follow the direction of their husbands however repressive it is. Considering the existing feature of men-women relations any survey would reveal the servile status of the women. Whether in social life or in cultural platform, the women have got no freedom. Actually they are treated as the manual force and agency for child bearing. Chastity of the women are always held in high esteem. But there is no predetermined norm. The most notable feature in this system is that the women are held to be the common property of the family whom the members can use for procreative purposes. Widowhood in this society is generally discouraged.

Amongst the Kinnor tribe the longevity of malefolk is very short as they die at the prime age of 20 to 30. Most of the malefolk contaminate T.B. and die premature. In such a state of affairs the women have got no other alternative but to marry more than one male to avoid deprivation in conjugal life.

Turning to the central Himalaya we come across the land of the Bhutias. In Bhutia society there is a village assembly and village club known as rambang that encourages the girl to have sexual experience during adolescent period. Clandestine abortions are very frequent particularly among the widows and adolescents.

India is a land of diversities. Various ethnic groups are available here. It is natural that different types of ethics and usages are prevalent in the subcontinent. In generality women here are considered with proto type of motherhood. Economic value of the women occupies secondary position. In polytheistic culture of this country the deities are females in greatest number. Spirituality, wherever resorted, assumes a female shape whether in the life of the ascetic or in the common life. Deviations there are no doubt, but this deviation does not mar the general image of

the women who is nothing but a symbol of primeval energy that is Adyasakti. The volatile character of some stray women has never blotted the smiling face of the motherly figure. Such freedom of the women has never been challenged even today.

If we make a survey of the life of the women in Himalayan track, we would find that nowhere women are discredited due to their sexual activity called legal or illegal. It is a component of nature and whenever the urge emanates, this can be satisfied through the mixing with any male but when we turn away from sexual life we would find that the position of the women in the society is never above the male folk, rather it is below the male. In Economic life also the women may render immense service but the controlling affairs are vested in the hands of the male.

Globalization and the tribal women:

The status of tribal women has completely changed in 21st century after globalization. The economic hegemony of the powerful states over developing countries has completely changed the situation of the last decades. The developing countries have been reduced to be the providers of raw materials both in goods and human resources. The women, who use to work in the field, in a cultural affluent society, are now working as economic tools in small business organizations including small scale industries, mining and commercial houses. No more the labour is an asset to be honoured but a resource to be fully exploited. Naturally the women workers are simply sources of labour for manual works. Their pristine glory and honour are no more the objects to be honoured.

In Bengal economic plans like D.V.C. etc. have already created an impact in respect of dispersal of the tribal people. The tribal women are now engaged in various concerns outside their home and naturally are exposed to molestation and dishonor. However they are being adjusted to the changing situation and accustomed to a culture of silence while deflowering their traditional prestige. They will now not be objects for service as maid servants alone in a non-tribal families where it has now been custom that the eldest male member is at liberty to behave with her erratically. The past relations of motherhood, sister hood etc. have been replaced with companionship. A culture of new behaviour has taken ground in tribal area.

In the North Eastern region of India big contractors and economic agents have multiplied immensely. They are penetrating into the villages. The activities are something other than human in respect of relation with the women. They care little even for the child and look upon the people as human commodities that can be sold or purchased. Various types of complains are coming from them. Even riots are erupting over the moves of the contractors and economic exploiters.

As a matter of fact, globalization in the third world countries has been interrelated as means to exploit man and matter to the fullest benefit of the economically powerful countries of the world, particularly multinational companies of Europe and America. If the trend is allowed to continue, the weakest communities in India would soon be converted into slaves and prostitutes. Tribal women would be the surest victims of such trend.

Man is for man only. They have their own intrinsic value which must be honored. This eternal ethics has been totally disregarded after globalization.

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