



RECONSTRUCTING TRIBAL IDENTITY: A STUDY FROM CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT: The tribe is one of the oldest primitive structures of the society in the world. The Geographic situation of the tribal villages surrounded by hills and forests away from the main developed areas and lacking in communication facilities stood in the way of a systematic improvement in the conditions of the community. The advancement and integration of the backward people, especially the tribes, was one of the national objectives. The wide gap between the tribals and the non-tribals needed to be narrowed down as quickly as possible. This required conservation of forests because the tribes were directly or indirectly dependent on forests everywhere in India. The tribals of Odisha from its cultural perspectives needs dynamism in experiencing „the human experiences“ of „the past flowing through the present“, manifesting itself in diversified „spirit“ being bound by „space and time“ and following a mechanism of withdrawal and return. The mechanism should be explained in terms of identifying twin processes of emerging Odia culture in the present scenario, i.e., Oriyanisation of the tribes and tribalisation of the Odias. In most places the tribes and forests were synonymous in meaning and mutual existence. This relationship was not only strong but also dynamic. India is a land of tribals. The history of the tribals occupies a unique position in the annals of mankind. The tribals belonging to innumerable primitive tribes have inhabited Odisha from time immemorial. They are generally called the Adivasis, implying original inhabitants. The ancient and medieval sources of information including the Vedic and the Epic literature mention.

KEY WORD: Tribal, Hill and Forest, Culture perspectives, Sprite, Space and time, Odia culture, Adivasi, Vedic, Epic.

The effort to understand Odisha from its cultural perspectives needs dynamism in experiencing „the human experiences“ of „the past flowing through the present“, manifesting itself in diversified „spirit“ being bound by „space and time“ and following a mechanism of withdrawal and return. The mechanism should be explained in terms of identifying twin processes of emerging Odia culture in the present scenario, i.e., Oriyanisation of the tribes and tribalisation of the Odias. Odia culture has originated through an all-out conflict between old and new principles of social organization.

It is better to say in Hegelian voice that Odia culture is a synthesis of tribe (thesis) and non-tribe (antithesis). The emerging Odia culture is ramifying with tribes as one of the great source potential without which the study of Odishan culture would never be completed. Tribal society is proceeding towards a greater civilization encompassing a variety of dimensions and some agonising implications. The answer to „What is the source-potential of a tribal culture“? revolves round a multifaceted evaluation explaining its struggling spirit since the days of Harappan culture to the present twenty-first century: As a tribe of

years, it was the promoter of Hinduism, and as a tribe of present century, it is determined to brake its homogeneity through adoption of diversified beliefs or broadly struggling to retain their primitive faith. The sociologists approach leaves no trace unturned in finding out continuity and continuum of the tribal-culture with the parent culture .The social and culture affinity between the tribes and non-tribes, and the forces of continuity and change in tribal society-all is a matter of prime concern as the tribes occupy handsome percentage to total population in Odisha. The crucial need of the present century is to make a „value-judgement“ of the tribal situation in Odisha considering the „yin and yang“ state with relative importance attached to their neurosis problem.

Defining the tribe we may say that are the people of pre-machine economy, practicing unsophisticated rituals and social customs, with undeveloped script for their speech, following small organization of local community and homogeneity. In the definition of the anthropologists, the term „tribe“ refers to a homogeneous group of people who are culturally and linguistically primitive, illiterate and uncivilized without any claim for themselves as followers of any major religion in India. This must be critically evaluated and the analyzed because we get reference to tribal influence diluting Aryan orthodoxy to some extent, especially in relation to socio-economic pursuits. This led to a „State Formation Process“ constituting a new society called „Hindu“ in which both the tribes and non-tribes assimilated and incorporated with a concept, that is Brahmanism.

An interesting question might have crept to our mind that if the tribes assimilated themselves with the Hindu-fold, then what about the present tribe? In finding out an appropriate answer, one must have to carry out a synthetic operation after doing much scrutiny over the statement of Varrier Elwin, i.e., “some tribes sincere effort to have on the battle of cultural contact” Roy Burman’s assertive remark that “some tribes” negative orientation or indifference to Hindu Social Order and Majumdar’s proposition, tribes developed discomforts and problems arising out of the influence of the culture or rural-urban group. The tribes, otherwise, known as primitive, tribal, indigenous, aboriginal, native, forest people are he autochthonic people of the land, in the sense that they had been long settled in different part of the county just after their entry into the land in the prehistoric days from various regions and directions.

Regarding the origin of the „tribe“, Nihar Ranjan Ray believes that the term is derived from the Latin word „tribuz“ meaning the three divisions into which the early Romans were grouped. Gradually, the term „tribe“ started to be used expressing different connotation in different European countries. The Romans identified the term „tribe“ whereas the Greeks equated it somewhat with their

„Fraternities“ at times, with geographical divisions at other: In Ireland it meant families or community of persons having the same surname.

The virginity of the indigenous tribe is said to have been contaminated following the penetration of the Aryan people to the land in search of „food-gathering“ economy. The superior social organization and the superior techno-economy of the Aryans had undoubtedly put a pressure on the indigenous „tribe“ to migrate group by group to the remotest part of the county, i.e., especially to inaccessible region of forests and hills and large mountains and slopes which may equate with Atavika Rajya (forest kingdoms), Mahakantaras (hill kingdoms) and Pratyanta Desa (frontier regions). Considering the decline of Indus vally civilization, both the anthropologists and sociologists ascribe to Aryan-invasion that led to expulsion of the original population to „Excluded-Areas“ or practically “Excluded Areas”. The process of tribal-shifts received a partial brake during colonial rule and now under constitutional safeguards the tribes become conscious of their fundamental rights. The growth of path-Indianism gives rise to tribal sub-nationalism, which is the pang of confrontation and interaction with non-tribes assimilated and lost their tribal identities and some other groups boldly retained their diacritical mark and worked for the preservation of their cultural self- image.

In the literal meaning of „tribe“ enlisted in the Oxford Dictionary, a race of people, now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in primitive or barbarous condition, under the headmen or chiefs,

appropriately applicable to the tribes living in India. The Rigvedic settlement witnessed Aryans fighting not only with themselves (the term is samgrama) but waging severe battles against the tribes, i.e., Dasas, Dasyus, Samyus, Parvatas, Buli-jawed Dasyus and Asuras. The logic of sociology behind these fighting had brought twofold reactions: one manifested itself in the process of integration and assimilation of foreign people with that of the tribes forwarding a Hindu-Brahmanical thrust following a mechanism of incorporation myths and legends, images and symbols, foods and drinks, dress and ornaments and above all, tradition and customs: secondly, not being accommodative or severely becoming repulsive to the acculturation process, the tribes made a slow retreat to the regions, poor in economy. To brand the tribal economic systems, in an ethnocentric fury, as backward and wasteful, customs and traditions as crude and tribal people steeped in primitive ignorance, is one thing and to prove it, it altogether another.

Analysing the present tribal situation in India, K.L.Sharma writes in his “foreword” in the book “Tribal Society in India” that tribal society has acquired complex social character in the face of colonial impact, isolation from the mainland and Hindu social organization, conversion to Christianity and Islam, and adoption of Hinduism, constitutional provisions and safeguard, dependence on agriculture and forest economy, etc. These contradictory influences have not only social and cultural divergencies, they have also resulted into class cleavages in an otherwise homogeneous society. Today, tribal society presents a mosaic to social, cultural, political and economic diversities and complexities.

Today Orissa claims 62 numbers out of 437 tribal communities living in India. They were widely different from one another in terms and their numbers, degree of economic development, level of adulteration and ethnographic details. The tribes are mostly visible in large numbers in the district of Malkangiri, Rayagada, Gajapati, Nawarangpur, Kandhamal, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj, Nuapada, Kalahandi and Keonjhar. The tribal communities though distinguished from those of the non-tribal societies as the former are homogeneous, kin-based and community-oriented differ from one another in many respects. The tribal of the yesterdays, who made themselves to be incorporated and integrated with the Aryan-fold imitating the latter’s customs, traditions, manners, behaviour and rituals are believed to be the early settlers on some river valleys of Orissa like Budhabalanga, Brahmani, Baitarani, Mahandi and its tributaries like Tel and also some other river valleys in western Orissa. The archaeological remains relating to Stone Age and prehistoric days confirms to the said theory. Although the prehistoric communities cannot be identified, it is well known that Orissa has been inhabited by tribes like Saura or Sabara (Sauri, according to Pliny, the Roman historian) from Mahabharata days. Medhatith, a Manu Samhita’s commentator, holds that Manu’s mlechha country beyond Aryavarta dwelt by the Dravida and Sabara type has also been inhabited by other tribes like Medha, Andhra and Pulinda.

Jagannath Dash reconstructs his theory relying on the empirical judgement of S.N. Roy (1927) that the Parna-Sabaras of Baraha Mihira’s writing is corruptionised to Oriya has patra-savaras. It is well known to us that Jara Savara killed Lord Krishna with his arrow. Sarala Das describes in his Mahabharata that one Dara Sabara, a lineal descendant of Jara Sabara worshipped the unburnt body part of Lord Krishna in the form of Nila Madhava. Some other references to tribes (Savaras) like Nishada, Antabasis, Chandalas, Pulindas, Swapanchas and Kiratas, who lived on by hunting is obtained from the verses of Amarakosh, a famous Lexicon of the seventh century A.D. Similarly, Ptolemy’s description of river Manada as rising from the Savara country is said to have identified with the river Mahanadi with an extensive Savara settlement on its banks, as S.N. Roy (1927:282) has described “The Natyasastra, which is said to have been written by Bharat Muni in the 6th century A.D. mentioned a rule that when the barbarians including the Odras and the Savaras have to be represented on the stage they should be made to speak what has been technically called in the book as Bibhasa. Furthermore, it is known from Mahabharata that the Savaras and Pulindas of Kalinga, who joined in Kalinga army, fought against the Pandavas in the great battle. There is also reference in Baudhayan Dharmasastra making a propitiation sacrifices like Punastoma or Sarvapristha in case one would visit the land of Pundra, Vanga and Kalinga. Gradually, in course of time, the orthodoxy has been diluted and there is no need of practicing any kind of propitiation in making pilgrimage to the land

of the said territories.

The territorial names Kalinga, Odra and Utkala are believed to be derived from the aboriginals inhabiting in the respective regions. The term „Kalinga“ is believed to be borrowed from Mundari dialect whereas one of the clan or killi of the Munda tribe is called as “Oriya” in the Mundari dialect. Similarly, a number of linguists consider that there must be a considerable Dravidian influence on the word Odra. S.N Roy (1927) believes that the Odras and Savaras lived side by side when leading a seminomadic life in the seacoast districts when Ashoka the Great is found to alert the people of Atavika rajayas (forest Kingdoms) to refrain from any kind of misdeeds failing of which would lead to their destruction and should not consider Emperors remorse as his Weakness. K.S. Behera believes that probably a group of defeated warriors, who fled away from Kalinga to the forest kingdom, became a source of trouble (Odiya Sahitya, Adivasi Sanskrit). Regarding the Origin of Oriya language. Roy argues that Savara language receded to the background due to Aryanisation of the Odras and acceptance of their as state-language after the conquest of Yajati Kesari to Orissa.

As a counter challenge to Jainism and Buddhism, the imperial Guptas policy to brahmanise the society is most probably welcomed to the tribe to join in the mainstream of Brahmanic-fold renouncing their old hunting profession by their knowledge and wisdom acquired through Vedic studies. Sometimes, adopting brahmanic way of life they made themselves brahmanas obtaining the social recognition. The Koroshanda plates state that Mathara kind Visakha Varman has granted a village to Savaras Vendaka Vishnut Sarma of Atreya gotra. It must be believed that, Savara Vendaka, a man from Savara tribe, after acquiring proficient knowledge and wisdom brahmaise himself with a new name “Vishnu Sarma” and claimed to belong to Atryee gotra. It is possible that due to nascent brahmanisation of the donee, he might not have been assigned with pravara, anupravara, charana and sakha. It is also seen that another Mathara ruler Maharaja Ananta Sakti Verman has granted Andorrepa village with exemption of all taxes to brahmanas of different gotras and charanas in order to create brahmanakula (Brahmana Kulebhoyoti Sritha). Let indicates that Andorrepa village was mostly inhabited by the aboriginals the phrase to create „brahmana kula“ symbolizes to crystallize the brahmanic way of life in the village so that there would be no obstruction to royal authority. On the other hand, the Saiodbhavas are believed to be Kshatriyanised in course of time. Tracing to their lineage with Pulindas they confirm to this idea. One of the Sailodbhava king Dharmaraja is said to have made a land grant to Savari Deva Dikshita Bhatta who belonged to Vatsa gotra, Pancharsi Pravas, Anu Pravara Kauthuma Sakha and Chhandogya Charana. The reference to Savari in the prefix of the name indicates the latter’s tribal origin.

Dhurvananda Deva a Nanda king, is said to have granted village Aira Pattamaliya to Bhatta, son of Suta Trivikrama and grandson of Jidaka Bhatta of Navarchhayasa Gotra, who migrated from vana (forest) and residing at Jambubad. Here we get three references to ascribe Bhatta’s tribal origin: (i)The gotra Navarchhayasa indicates its non-technological relationship with the non-tribes, (ii) Jidaka Bhatt’s migration from a forest, (iii) granting of land Aira pattamaliya which indicates the very much presence of a large number of good elephants. Similarly, the references to bramhanisation of the Savaras are obtained from the Orissa Museum plate of Ranaka Ranabhanjadeva. Another reference to old Savari women consoling to the wives of defeated enemies who fled away to jungle for their prestigious shelter is found from the Somavamsi records. One of the Sulki king Rana Stambha Deva is said to have defeated the king of Dhekata who was also reinstated with honour to his former position by the former. Dhekata is a tribe and some scholars attribute its origin to the Savara tribe. It is possible that the name Dhenkanal might have been derived from the Dhekata tribe.

Regaridng the foundation of imperial Ganga dynasty, it is mentioned in some of the inscriptions that Kamarnava Deva and his four brothers had established their kingdom after defeating the Savara king Baladitya. In spite of all the efforts made by the Savaras to aryanise themselves, they are still found to dwell in the dense forest of Orissa. Another reference to aryanise a Bhil tribe dominated village by the Somavamsi rulers is also obtained. The Nanda rulers of Orissa styled themselves as the Lord of the Gond Sakalas

gondramadhipati), one of the feudatory chiefs of Somavamsi ruler Samanta Indraraja while making land grants, is found to communicate about the purpose of Gandaka Nayaka, The term gandaka nayaka literally denotes to a chief of Gond tribe. It is known from the Asanapat inscription that one of the kings of Naga dynasty known as Satrubhanja is said to have ruled over Vindhyaavati Kingdom. Most probably this Vindhyaavati kingdom refers to modern Keonjhar Mayurbhanj districts of Orissa. There is also another reference to Astadasa Atavika Rajyas (eighteen forest kingdoms) which were ruled by King Loka Vighraha along with Toshala. Reference to Goddess Jharakhanda and Soungh Jharakhanda region are obtained from Copper plate Inscription of Arkesvara Deva (1148 A.D) and Narasimha Deva-II (1295 A.D) respectively. The famous treatise, Siraj-Firoz Shahi which throws a considerable light on lifestyle of the tribes of Orissa prevailing at the time of Firoz Shah's invasion describes. The tribes were used to live either on trees or on ground; since their language was different from each other, nobody could follow their language nor they followed other's language. By making sounds they used to make the wild animals strange characteristic was that in apprehension of external aggression, they pierced a sharp knife for oozing out blood from their ear and seeing this blood their kinsmen would gather in that place. Ram Das's Dadhyata Bhakhti a (16th century product) that eulogises Vaishnava cult refers to penetrating Vaishnavism amongst Savara tribe through highlighting on Ananda Kautuki, a Savara of Cuttack district who being initiated into „Ram-Taraka-Mantra“ left his chasing habit and proved himself as a great devotee of Vaishnava cult.

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