

BOOK REVIEW

Contemporary Society : Tribal Studies Volume One: Structure and Power

Edited by George Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera, 1997, iix + 359. Rs. 600/- (cloth), Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi (1997).

The authors have brought out two volumes on *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies*, in honour of Professor S.N. Ratha, Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology in Sambalpur University, Orissa. This is the first volume dealing with structure and process.

The editors have collected 25 articles. These have been divided into 5 categories - structural and ethnic issues, women, aged, ecology and ideology. Most of the tribal case studies are from Assam and Orissa, but studies on tribal communities from Himachal, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and North East are also included. Essentially the book deals with Indian tribals except for one on American Indians.

George Pfeffer in "The Scheduled Tribes of Middle India as a Unit" has advocated that we must study tribal groups in India both structurally and culturally - on the basis of their traditional ideas. Pfeffer begins with the approach of Dumont which view Indian society on the basis of abstract ideas or values derived from Hindu caste-based society. The author rejects this view point as it leaves the tribal population out. The tribal population form a significant eight per cent of Indian population. They must be considered as essential part of Indian society. At the same time Pfeffer modifies the tribal group on the basis of universally comparable categories of land-owner and agricultural labourers or clans and lineages. The author advocates that these structural units and categories must be understood on the basis of local tribal ideas which defines the status relationships. Status differences govern intertribal relations and relations between sub-tribes or between clans. Even at the village level members of a single clan can be sub-divided into closely interrelated ritual groups of different standing.

Richard H. Brown has contributed two chapters. The first one is on cultural representation and ideological domination. Brown provides a lucid account of the system of classification of cultural and social categories. These categories

are use as 'method for organizing perceptions, knowledge and moral relationships. The author describes the process of labelling and classification of tribal communities by the colonizers. The formation of identities on the basis of cultural differences can be compared with inter-social differences and prejudices.

The second article by Richard H. Brown concerns the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. Brown points out the general assumption that the development of nationalism requires the emergence of common cultural identity in contrast to primordial ethnic identification. Majority of the new states being multi-ethnic and multicultural, a struggle ensues between different groups - ethnic, religious, linguistic, for self-assertion and domination. This struggle sometimes takes the form of mild discrimination against the individual members of a subordinate group. It may even assume the form of extreme repression such as genocide, enslavement or co-ercive assimilation of an entire minority population. The politically dominant elite may make efforts to create culturally homogenous nation state. Discrimination against minority groups may include the repression of autonomous cultural practices of ethnic communities and imposition of culture of the dominant group. The creation of national culture has been at the cost of other cultural components, especially those which are economically competitive or politically threatening to the emergent national elites.

The author is concerned about this phenomenon. He examines the cases of Thailand and India. In Thailand effort is being made to achieve modernization and nationalism by reducing traditional status differences, by emphasizing universalistic tendencies of Buddhism and using education for modernization. Indian state faced with multiplicity of cultures, religions, languages and ethnic groups has tried to build on accommodative non-coercive but historical relationships which is legacy of tradition. State in India aims to become ethnically neutral, secular and modern. Brown clearly pins hope on India's approach to its cultural diversity.

F.G. Bailey's piece on ethnic differences and their rhetorical uses is very instructive about

the present situation in India or elsewhere. The concern about the tribal people of India betrays hypocrisy on part of those outsiders who depict them in accordance with their own orientation. Thus the British administration classified them as different and distinct categories from non-tribal Indians. Some of them found extraordinary physical qualities in their bodies.

Macpherson found their villages beautiful, their agriculture honourable and their society enlightened. The author also discusses the well known debate between Verrier Elwin's views on Indian tribals and G.S. Ghurye's criticism. Elwin was fascinated by the simplicity, the art and dances and the natural life of the tribals in India. He was distressed by their poverty and exploitation by the powerful non-tribals. He advocated the policy of protection for them in relation to the land, culture and technologically simple economy. Ghurye repudiated Elwin's ideas and went to the extent of claiming that the tribals were not different from Hindus. He designated them as backward Hindus. Bailey views the debate as that between the different poles which seek political intervention either to save or to do away with tribal cultures and values. The debate is essentially between two scholars representing a diverse cultural background.

Another interesting article in this section deals with the issues of American Indian identity. Peter T. Suzuki argues that the basic social unit of American Indians shall remain in the term of tribe. He proposes that the term tribe should be used to describe well defined and marked ethnic units in different parts of the world. He even suggests the use of the concept even for industrial society. For example Turkish workers in Germany could be designated as Turkish tribe. Thus many nation may contain tribe within its boundaries. Other categories could be in the form of mainly nationality groups such as American Blacks (racial minority). One is not convinced how the proposal helps in refining the concepts.

Eight of the articles deal with women in tribal society in different part of India. Some deal with role and status of women in society. Others chose to be more analytical and talk of gender inequalities and dynamics. Unfortunately the discussion and the ethnographic background account is not conducted in a common theoretical framework. Bhasin investigate the relationship between fertility and the general status of women among the

Gaddi of Himachal Pradesh. They have worked out birth rate, fertility rate, educational status, age at marriage and health status. They conclude that ecological and environmental factors in Bharmour area of Himachal Pradesh favour women in the domain of status and authority.

B.N. Borthakur has written on social justice and women among the Mishing. He concludes that in the Mishing society the women are deprived of educational, occupation, social, religious and political rights.

Behera and Nanda's work among the Plain Bhuiyan reveal that women stand at a disadvantage in different aspects of life. The author provide qualitative data on education, health status and womens role in household activities.

R. Indira and Shanti give a detailed study on changing gender relation among the Jenukuruba a hunting and food gathering tribe in Karnataka. Now they are agriculturists but many have to migrate in dry season in search of work. The modernizing influences has affected the women adversely. The authors have failed to provide meaningful insight into the changing nature of economic activities and how these have affected the traditional system of relations in the society. N.K. Das examines the status of women in North East on the basis of this land rights. Women in this region have traditionally enjoyed greater economic advantage and higher social status.

There are three articles on the aged among the tribal communities they have emphasized on integration of the aged with the rest of society through family, the kin network and the neighbourhood ties. Behera et al. examine the problems experienced by the aged among the Plain-Bhuiyan in changing socio-economic conditions.

There are six articles on economy and its relationship with environment. There are issues such as forest problems in relation to tribal groups, changing eco-system and deforestation which have been discussed in some of the articles in this volume. Lastly there are two pieces on disease and traditional medicine system and Mortuary rites.

On the whole the volume is a welcome addition to the growing volume of tribal studies in India.

I.S. Marwah

Professor

*Department of Anthropology
University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India*