

Aspects of Leisure Among the Tribes

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to talk of the experience and nature of leisure among the tribes that I have encountered in my country. I have chosen to do this because I think that the definition of leisure that is accepted is not adequate to explain either the nature or experience of leisure of the tribes or even those who dwell in the villages of India. I have no conflict with the traditional meaning of leisure or with the fact that leisure is a product associated with industrialization; however I strongly feel that there is need to transcend this traditional meaning to show that it is as much an aspect of human behaviour and activity as any other.

Most available literature assumes that leisure perforce is to be contrasted against work, with the idea of time that is not spent in work, with activities that are away from the scene of work and so on. That there is a close link between industrialization and organized leisure goes without saying, however, for communities who are yet to be inducted into the mind-set that goes with industrialization cannot draw distinctions between work and non-work or work time and free time in their daily lives. With our involvement about the many beneficial aspects of leisure and sheer variety of leisure activities, research focusing on leisure in other societies gets sidetracked or ignored (Sharma, 1990) Leisure has assumed the dimensions of an industry in which leisure services are conceived and provided following ideas of profit and loss.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Bose (1957) in his paper, "The effect of urbanization on work and leisure", argues that urbanization leads to personalized leisure diverse in character and there is decay of the traditional modes of transmission of culture (p. 2,9). In his study he has shown that urbanization urges people to take upon themselves the responsibility of providing entertainment, the chief form of leisure and as a result the traditional entertainers

for who entertaining was employment are left without a vocation. This personalized leisure then is moulded according to personal preferences. In a rejoinder to Bose (1957) and Roy Burman (1957) has pointed out that "leisure is always personal, both in industrial and pre-industrial societies though it is society that makes available leisure to individuals or groups of individuals in significant forms".

Roberts (1970) has provided the population time and money to cultivate leisure interests on an unprecedented scale and that it has also created a new awareness of leisure.

Kaplan (1970) examines the institutional transformations that take place as the forms and meanings of leisure change. He further implies that anything then could be leisure for an individual.

Another genre of writing includes diverse treatment of leisure. Leisure is seen as an integral ingredient of cultural policy planning that should take into account demographic age structures; age-based institutionally defined role structure and the symbolically coded, cultural representation of phases and transitions in the life cycle (Koch-Weser, 1960)

Striking a somewhat somber note are the thoughts of Bogardus (1960) and Eldridge and associates (1950). Bogardus says that the development of increased leisure time does not necessarily give people more time for social problems or social control. In fact many of them use this extra time in a restless search for excitement and avoiding social responsibilities. Such people rush away from social responsibility. Eldridge and associates bemoan the fact that "more and more leisure hours of the masses are being pre-empted by the commercialized forms of recreation...and we have a peculiar philosophy of leisure along with the commercialization of leisure and that we have an impoverishment of life during leisure hours". Karlin (1967) asks how the newly won leisure hours available due to industrialization is to be used. Will there be "a great cultural revival in the arts" though in the rush for "fun oriented future foretells that the

teen-age subculture to today may be tomorrow's adult life in automated society". Obviously this will be a departure from the earnestness that the Greeks took their leisure, meaning as time spent in non-necessitous exercise of the creative faculties. The Greeks called leisure as *scholē* from which is derived the word school. The object of leisure was the pursuit of excellence, unrelated to the necessity of earning one's living.

Possession of leisure was and is a marker for the distinctions in social class, separating the elite from the non-elite (Dressler and Willis, 1969).

The *leit motif* in most of the available literature is that "leisure has certain traits that are characteristic only of the civilization born from the industrial revolution" (Dumazedier, 1968 and Dumazedier, 1967) However, this paper takes off from the position that "...in the future the different industrial and preindustrial societies will be in increasing need of research ... (to) evaluate the resources available for leisure in the cultural development of whole societies" (ibid.).

The modern or more contemporary writings do not seem to be concerned about raising the issue of the distinctions between industrial and pre-industrial societies in the ways they may perceive leisure, rather, they are focussed on the variety of leisure activities and the importance of the role of the state in providing for these hours away from work. It is assumed that pre-industrial societies will find themselves eventually, in the same predicament of having more time than before on their hands. There is also the apprehension that more and more leisure activities will involve others in the provision of the services but actually be more and more individualized.

AN EXAMINATION INTO THE SANTAL AND A FEW OTHER TRIBE'S EXPERIENCE OF LEISURE

We will have to suspend some of the ideas of leisure that we have ourselves as well as what is suggested in literature. In this section I shall describe two tribes, the Santals who are a settled peasant community of the eastern part of India and the Jarawas who are hunter-gatherers of the Andaman Islands, India. Very briefly, the former is for most purposes settled agriculturists but having a very living tradition of migration. They also do not own much land for which reason they have to employ themselves in the lands of others on a daily wage-earning basis. This obvious dependence on availability of work leaves often unequal work thereby unequal free time every day as well as there being seasonal variations.

There is another important factor that of time spent in actual work, which is dependent on the employer and not always consistent with the payment for labour put in. In contrast, the Jarawas are hunter-gatherers who work for a maximum of 4 to 5 hours on the days that they work, because they work only when they need to. They are not dependent on any employer nor are they dependent on modern resources. Thus they have a large part of daylight hours spent without work. It is obvious why work hours are being distinguished from non-work hours; this is in acceptance of the fact that leisure is surely associated with the time spent away from work. However, there is a subtle difference, among the Santals I will show that work and non-work are interspersed with each other, that both complete the cycle of a day. Among the Jarawas, there seems to be a pristine form of leisure that they experience, because of their complete dependence on resources that cannot be available through any commercial means. This is in sharp contrast to what the contemporary industrialized man experiences, the need to generate "enough" wealth in order to enjoy "quality" leisure. There is also a qualitative difference in expectations from leisure that can be analyzed in terms of cross-cultural variations.

In one heavy workday the Santals, men and women may be seen taking short rests as pauses in work without disturbing the overall tempo. During this time the men may smoke, sit in a comfortable position or take out from his things a sling to catch birds. Women who are engaged in construction work are more often engaged in brick carrying or supplying materials to the mason. They too stop work periodically, sitting to chat with the other women who may still be working at their own pace, or take up the baby they may have left under a tree to feed. One may notice the time spent in doing actual work, at a slow pace without hurry but not leaving work unfinished. It is something to watch them arranging the bricks preparing them for use. Most Santal women use a rather artistic arrangement that women of other communities working in the same place do not. This input of art is not at all a requirement of the work that is assigned to them. When there are visitors at home, their arrivals do not upset the tempo of work that the householders may be engaged in, formalities of welcome are not rushed and conversations are carried on during engagement in work. Then there may be a long time that may be spent with the visitor away even from routine household duties. After a hard day's work or on the days when they may have no work

or may have stayed away from work, drinking rice beer that they brew themselves or just sitting still weaving a net or in quietitude, sitting side by side with other men on the roadside outside their homes. There is not much talk but silent communication takes place. Sometimes women may spend their free time in singing songs in unison; this they can be heard doing in their place of work. Their festivals are great times for leisure, not so much the rites and rituals but the dancing, singing and playing of the musical instruments. Leisure consists in visiting fairs and having something to eat or going on rides. In the traditional fairs of our country the exhibits that draw a large section of the rural crowds are not material things on sale but strange and freakish items or items displaying acts of nerve like in the circus items. These activities require a certain amount of surplus generation and it is found that these activities peak in the seasons after harvest.

However, what is more important than these observations from field situations is how the Santals perceive what I have described as leisure. Do they also see these and other such activities as leisure or do they have their own semantics? The answers to the question, what is leisure, evoked a response that was echoed by most, there is no time for leisure as all time is spent in work. In the absence of ideas of gainful work or prescribed-time work, the idea of leisure time does not develop. When I pointed out to somebody sitting in the sun or sitting between tasks, and ask another what the person was doing, the answer would be "nothing", an answer that they rarely made about themselves. It used to seem paradoxically a case of double standards. I am yet to be able to come up with a logical reason, though I have some ideas suggested by repeated interaction. It is very difficult to differentiate between work and leisure or non-work in everyday life though there may be an ideal distinction between the two without any one being value-loaded or the two being compartmentalized. Also a person who is inactive is not stigmatized as an idler. Idlers are not denigrated till the persons so described are not dependent on others for economic sustenance and is not a nuisance. There is a lot of tolerance for inaction. The question remains whether we can consider non-work as leisure in the case of the Santals. This is a difficult question but it is the integration of work and leisure among them that distinguishes their quality of life even to a lay observer.

There is a word in the Santal language, "raska" that means fun or joy (Culshaw, 1949). All that

they do, they expect that it should have the quality of evoking "raska" and it is not uncommon to observe that they sometimes even leave a particular employment because of the lack of this spirit. They work because there is "raska" and they sing and dance because there is "raska". This is not age-specific; Santals of all ages can partake of this spirit. Nobody disturbs another's experience of "raska", be they parents in the case of their children or vice versa. The age groups have their own ways of experiencing "raska" and it is for this reason that as one grows older in this society, there exists scope for the old to derive their own sense of "raska". There are not the antecedent features of having to reorient their leisure activities.

ASPECTS OF LEISURE AND TENSION

What we miss in most writings is the relation between tension generation and leisure. Leisure is seen as a means of working out the tensions created by work experiences or ambience of work. In our societies, leisure becomes a pursuit, and sometimes, like the ancient Greeks, a serious one. Among the tribes leisure is not seen as something 'elusive' that has to be worked for, it comes naturally through work and life experience. For us pursuit of leisure in order to reduce tension has created its own vicious cycle, one uses leisure to reduce tension but we sometimes carry our tensions to leisure activities. One of the reasons is that our leisure is more artefactual than that of the tribes. >From the little Jarawa experience that I have, handicapped with the lack of knowledge of their language, I can at best base my ideas on secondary sources of information. This little known tribe of the Andaman Islands, India, are a hunting gathering community who spend very little time in actual work. We may observe them spending long stretches of time every day in relative inactivity, lying down in their communal hut, sitting at the opening of the hut, beading a shell necklace, or weaving a basket neither for exchange with other goods or for sale. One could say that these were all economic activities of one sort or the other but why should these be seen different from some of the things that we do with fashioning objects according to our interests without any pecuniary considerations? After the day's hunt is done, there is hectic activity of cleaning and cooking the kill and once eating is over, the other activities could be termed as activities of relaxation or leisure (the source for these observations is an unpublished document entitled, "Jarawa contact: us with them and theirs with us", Anthropological Survey of India, Govt.

of India, Kolkata, and *The Jarawas: Language and Culture*, by M.Sreenathan, 2001). There is a lesson for us here; we have come to confuse leisure and economics (at various levels: status, prestige, turning hobbies and interests into sources of economic sustenance etc.) and forgotten the reason for getting involved in leisure activities.

DISCUSSION

It was thought that more and more industrialization would leave more and more time not devoted to work for more and more people and that there would have been a cultural revival of sorts; that we would progress to the *scholè* of the Greeks. Has it really worked that way? Industrialization has opened up the world of opportunities in work and leisure and leisure too has become serious business. Our aspirations towards surplus generation have increased and in the process we have put ourselves in the 'rush' mode for doing more work for that extra surplus. We have to somehow squeeze out of our precious time, time for leisure that we want to utilize in the best possible way and that is often in ways that are trendy, costly, not always related to age etc. The time available for work never seems enough and the surplus generation too "falls short" of our expectations. For us like work, surplus too is boundless and limitless. Our sense of insecurity too drives us to more and more work. For the tribes, surplus generation does not always follow this direct correlation, both work and surplus is contained within limits and there seems to be a greater sense of security in faith in bountiful nature.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate that issues of leisure in our contemporary times have become narrow because of the universalization/generalizations of the implications and commodification of leisure, kind of reducing it to the lowest common multiple.

KEY WORDS Leisure and idleness; Santals; Jarawas; social organization and meanings of leisure

ABSTRACT Perception of leisure differs from people to people, as does the concept. Connotations of leisure too differ from culture to culture. Somewhere, it is a symbol of laziness; somewhere it may be an opportunity for entertainment and somewhere it may be considered

that it needs to be organized and time-slotted. In many cases, leisure is much sought after breaks in the busy schedule of life. In India, there had been a tradition of textualizing the ways of enjoying and making good use of leisure. This paper is in reference to the Santals with a passing reference to the Jarawas (Andaman and Nicobar Islands), a widely distributed tribe of eastern India. To answer the question why this particular tribe has been selected in order to discuss leisure - these people are known to possess *raska*, a sense of fun or joy of life. These people are also members of societies practising subsistence economies, usually not considered in discussions on leisure as leisure has largely been seen as a product of industrialization. It is true that institutionalized pastime activities are in most studies synonymous with leisure, on which count these people could be left out, but this kind of understanding is stymied and makes us ignore the celebratory ways in which they perceive life and living. I would like to demonstrate that tradition; social organization and way of life of the Santals impart qualitative meaning to leisure hitherto not delineated in research.

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