

Social Transformation and Political Orientation: The Case of Midnapore Tribals

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THE CONTEXT AND THE BACKGROUND

Social transformation is less deterministic when compared with modernization or development. Obviously, such a transformation process has multiple dimensions. As is evident today, social transformation brought into effect through development plans mostly belong to the political sphere dominated by state and national level politics. In this sphere priorities of the political parties, personal ambition of the political leaders, political prestige of the contesting parties, and other such factors of 'irrational' category become more important. In the tribal situation prevailing in the undivided Midnapore district of West Bengal economic changes and political management display a level of inequality. This has probably forced the tribals to go for politicizing their own identity. Changes noticeable in the life style pattern of Midnapore tribals are basically economic changes, which fall into two categories: (i) occupational changes in the direction of activities pertaining to labour from agricultural activities, and (ii) changes which have direct political bearing in the sense that traditional modes of control are led by state agencies and political parties. It may be possible to establish a link between the two. As far as Midnapore tribals are concerned, social transformation at the behest of political affiliation is a reality. In the economic sphere, they have realized that what is good for one member may not necessarily be good for all other members. Coming under the banner of a communal party may be viewed as a desperate attempt to project their identity, but it takes them to the path of confrontation. It has even pervaded their community life. From the anthropological point of view, undivided Midnapore district in the state of West Bengal provides a contrasting situation for assessing the trend of social transformation among the tribals. It is representative of a situation where state and national level politics have made inroads into the tribal system. It may be noted that population-wise Midnapore reveals features, some of which

are specific to the region and some of which bear the stamp of a more general pattern. The following points deserve special attention:

- (i) Midnapore has one of the highest tribal populations among the districts of West Bengal. As a fall out of that, a demand was made for the inclusion of tribal-dominated areas of the district in the recently constituted state of Jharkhand.
- (ii) Of all the tribal groups, the Santal are the most dominant. Other tribal groups include the Lodha, Kharia, Bhumij Munda, Oraon, Bodiya, Kora, Mahali, etc. The members or these tribes live in a situation which is highly interactive and where the non-tribals, with various governmental and political party-level controlling agencies on their side, have made considerable dent into the tribal political organization. There are occasions when matters directly involving the tribals are also decided by them.
- (iii) The non-tribal population, represented by the caste Hindus and Muslims, provide the contact situation for the tribals. In such a contact situation, though each community exercises a certain amount of selectiveness, 'tribe-peasant' and 'tribe-caste' continua may still be overtly or covertly manifested. Mention may specifically be made of 'Tribal-Rajput continuum' as put forward by Surajit Sinha (1962) on the basis of his historical and ethnographic studies of the Bhumij.
- (iv) The interaction pattern between the tribals and non-tribals in Midnapore must be examined from a specific historical context. The Santal example maybe cited. Bhowmick's (1987) observation on them, though debatable, may be taken as an attempt to highlight this point. He writes,
"The Santals call themselves as 'Hor' meaning 'Man', but we call them as 'Santal' which is possibly a term derived from *Samantapal*, i.e. border-guard used by their dominating nontribal neighbours, as these people

lived beyond the Hindu Caste settlements or enclaves at that time. In course of time, even the Santals too, in compelling situations, had to accept the term 'Santal' for their own identity."

Bhoumick, however, did not elaborate what the 'compelling situations were. Generally speaking, Santal interaction with the non-tribals of the region followed a pattern derived from a historical course of development on which they themselves had very little control. There was a certain amount of historical compulsion about the situations they had to face. These were the situations created out of their contact with the dominant non-tribal population, who had made deep inroads into the Santal territory.

- (v) In a pluralistic situation the tribals on most occasions enjoy the status of ethnic minorities.
- (vi) Economic, political and social changes in status among the tribals are not always at par or in tune with the majority community.
- (vii) The forest, which sustained them for a long time, has lost its hold over their economic life to a considerable extent due to its large-scale destruction and also due to their loss control over it. This factor of reduced man-forest relationship is singularly important in forcing some of them to go for settled cultivation, wage labour and industrial work. But in these fields they face an uphill competition from the non-tribals.
- (viii) Differentiation has crept in the tribal social system as the new generation is socialized into patterns of behaviour, which do not quite fit with the traditionally defined cultural and social positions. Affiliations to political parties are to an extent responsible for differentiating tribals into tradition-bound and emergent role performers.

POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND INTERACTION PATTERN

The political constraints under which the tribals of Midnapore function, interfere with their life situations more directly as they have become increasingly dependent on the dominating political order established by the Marxist or, more correctly, Leftist Government of West Bengal. In the tribal system the communistic ideology is

expected to find a relatively easy acceptability because of its emphasis on equality. Still, in the ultimate analysis identity along ethnic lines holds sway over the prophecy for establishing a broad socialistic order as has been reflected in the popularity of the Jharkhand movement for a full-fledged state incorporating tribal-inhabited areas from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. There have been frequent clashes between the members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the followers of the Jharkhand Party. Of course, the conflict between the two groups cannot always be taken as the result of differences in outlook between tribals and non-tribals. It also involves two contesting groups of tribals. The killing of a tribal Deputy Commissioner in a Belpahari village under Jhargram subdivision in 1992 may be cited as an example of this conflicting outlook. But it has to be conceded that the Midnapore tribals in general were considerably swayed by the demand for a separate state, which could safeguard the interests of the tribals of the region. With the creation of a separate Jharkhand state the political pressure on them has been mounting. A situation has been created where they have come under increasing pressure from the political parties, more so from the Leftists. As things stand today, it may be possible to speak in terms of 'polarisation' between the Leftists and Jharkhandis. Lately, a new political force in the name of an extremist Naxalite organization has made its appearance in Midnapore West. It has the potentiality to disturb the existing process of political alignment. Among the national political parties, B.J.P. has recently made an incursion into the tribal belt of Midnapore. But ethnic identity still engages the attention of the tribal people in general. As a matter of fact, ethnic identity so vigorously pursued by a large section of the tribals today has affected the style of life and outlook of the people depending on the readiness with which they are able to stand up against a politically installed sanctioning authority in the form of state organization. There is another side of the picture. Some tribals, who, in their individual capacity, are aligned with the ruling party, have added a new dimension to the problem of tribal identity. But giving more stress on individual economic benefits and political gains is not always in the best interest of the community as a whole. It distorts the shared image of the 'self' and strikes at the very root of the integrated structure of the

society so long demonstrated by a tribe. Needless to say, the essence of a tribal society is the collective output, which can only nurture its identity, its ethos, and its values. If collective dream is an irrational factor, so also is the personal ambition. Still, in these days of economic dominance, technological skill and political maneuver, self-interest rather than group consciousness seems to be the priority. Finding a place in the category of an economic class with derived advantages becomes a more important proposition in that case.

It may no longer be possible to apply the popular 'continuum' model in an absolute sense to describe the type of relationship in existence between the tribals and non-tribals. Initially, the tribals were lured into a larger regional identification through 'economic symbiosis' with the Hindu castes and peasants. With initial expectation clearly on the decline, the link with the Hindu society has come under close scrutiny from the more knowledgeable section of the tribals. A tendency has now developed in them to attribute all kinds of economic and socio-cultural deprivations to their almost complete identification with the Hindu caste and peasant groups. It has generated protests in them in the form of movements and new political affiliations. The introduction of the modern *panchayat* system has reduced the tribal village council to position of lesser importance. The traditional village council remains mainly engaged in matters connected with religion and rituals, birth and death. Its power is clearly on the decline, particularly in issues concerning land disputes, inheritance of property, imposition of taxes, developmental activities. A parallel may be drawn with some areas of North-East India where the traditional Village Council has also been reduced to a less important position. In the hill areas of Manipur, the Village Authority, established at the behest of the state government, exercises real power. It has associated itself more directly with the practical problems faced by the people in their material existence. What is more important, it enjoys the patronage of the state government. But those who are in this body are usually from the concerned village or villages and there is hardly any outsider inducted in it. In Midnapore the *panchayats* rarely function along community lines. The *Anchalik Panchayat* representing an area exercises greater control over villages composed of tribal population. There are non-

tribals representing tribal villages at the *Anchalik Panchayat* level. In some cases, even at the Gram Panchayat level the non-tribals manage to find a place. So, it is doubtful whether all types of social transformation in tribal areas are spontaneous in nature in as much as these do not quite meet the expectations of the people. An impression is created, which in some cases becomes a conviction, that access to resource base and distribution of benefits depend more on one's commitment to and participation in the contemporary political system. Kamalalota is a multiethnic village under Nayagram Block, the population of which is composed of Santals, Lodhas, Koras, Mundas and Bhumij. The Santals are not only the numerically dominant group, but they also represent the village at the political level. But in the process they uphold the interest of the political party more than their own interest. A few years back Chandamani Murmu was the village representative at the Nayagram Gram Panchayat. She was also a member of the Nayagram Branch Committee of the C.P.I. (M). It was, however, left to Harish Tripathi, a member of the *Jilla Parishad*, to resolve any serious internal dispute that might crop up between the constituent groups of the village. This only shows the nature of intervention by the political party in the affairs of the people. The same situation still continues. It may be mentioned here that quite a number of tribals from this area, who had earlier belonged to the Jharkhand Party, joined the C.P.I. (M) party in recent times. It cannot be said with certainty that all of them were willing partners. The local C.P.I. (M) leaders seized the opportunity of propagating the party's strength in having a wide base at the mass level. The leaders emphasized time and again that with their party firmly in the saddle, inter-community conflicts involving the tribals had reduced to a considerable extent.

Interaction pattern between tribals and non-tribals and between tribals themselves may be examined from the standpoint of 'complementary' and 'reciprocity' of inter-human actions and reinforcements as developed by Gouldner (1967).

"... Complementarity connotes that one's rights are another's obligations, and *vice versa*. Reciprocity, however, connotes that each party has rights and duties."

In the former case the parties involved are unequal partners. The social context of the two different groups involved in such a relationship

is never the same. At the higher political level the tribals are undoubtedly at the receiving end. One-sided complementarity marks the relationship between the tribals and non-tribals in that sphere. To the tribal interactants such a motivational relation rarely brings satisfaction. For argument's sake, if it is to be conceded that reciprocal interest should govern the relationship between the two sections of the populations, then the tribals are to be given more say, or, in specific terms, more power at the higher level of politics. This will at least dispel any apprehension in the minds of the tribal people that they are victims of 'internal colonisation' and in the process keep their morale high. Morale is an evaluative functional category, which determines the legitimacy of a system from the standpoint of ego. In this sense, morale is a measure of authority system and power structure. However, morale as an attitude does not always follow a unified path. It is not possible, nor is it necessary, that the same people will have the same degree of morale on every occasion. From this point of view, the attitude of the tribals also varies depending upon the closeness with which they are associated with reference groups, political parties and leadership.

IMPLICATIONS OF TRIBAL SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

As it is, social transformation among the tribals follows a more or less directed course. It is doubtful whether economic prosperity could be a leveller. Moreover, the type of economic prosperity we are used to and the way it is to be achieved disturb the co-operative base of the tribal social system. At Kamalalota village the Santals worked in the agricultural fields of Buddhadeb Singh, the Bhumij Ex-M.L.A., on payment while the Lodhas were employed by the Santals for the same purpose. Paid labour as controlled at different levels. A preliminary survey conducted in a Kora village near Midnapore town revealed that the limited few who could manage to get a permanent worker's job in the adjacent Tata Metallic Works had a greater share of agricultural land and had a more easy access with the panchayat leaders. By selling off a portion of agricultural land they could acquire the minimum necessary skill by gaining political access to make an entry into the field of industrial labour. Those who were landless or had very small agricultural holdings could not reach that level. That was the case of with Binu Mundi, a landless agricultural

labour, who could not improve his lot in spite of the fact that he did manage to get a job of an earthfiller at the Tata Metallic Works. The job was a purely temporary one meant for a very limited time period and he was also in no position to stake a claim for a higher-grade job for which he did not qualify. His capability was partly conditioned by his accessibility to resource base and power base. The story of Binu Mundi could be the story of many others like him. Their story has not yet ended. It must be admitted that turning forest-dwellers and agricultural settlers into wage earners and industrial labourers may not always go to the advantage of the group as a whole, more so, when it involves the question of political manipulation. A change of this nature is a lopsided one, which weakens the bonds that hold the society together. The process of weakening is rather faster than the rate of increase in the economic options to a less differentiated tribal community.

The fact is, the tribals have also entered the field of power relations in a significant way and they have even formulated an 'ideology of power' often supported by the traditional kinship relations. In a situation of changing power relations social transformations are bound to be unequal. In the history of India as a nation such a situation was prevalent immediately after the transfer of power from the British Government to the independent India. As Bose (1967) observes,

"Under these circumstances, not only were the social transformations unequal, but eventually they led to significant inequalities and tensions in the political field when power came to Indian people either through British Constitutional reforms, or as a result of massive political action undertaken by the people of India in general."

In other words, social transformation among the tribes is following the same trend as was evident during India's long struggle for the attainment of a national status. To quote N.K. Bose (1967) again,

"The tribes have to make up much leeway in their advance to modern life, and there is a consequent and natural desire to bring the necessary amount of social change as fast as possible. And this takes on the same character as was witnessed during India's growth to nationalism. In the case of similar growth among Schedule Tribes we can designate this as the growth of a 'communal subnationalism'."

The observation is no less valid even today. In the context of Midnapore and adjoining areas belonging to the neighbouring states, which cannot possibly be separately treated, the whole process of social transformation deserves to be seen from this angle. As has been demonstrated by history time and again, increased contact, influence of the general process of modernisation directed through a process of politicisation cannot always stop 'communal sub-nationalism' from making headway.

On a number of occasions, social transformation proves to be counterproductive to those who try to see it primarily as a means of social control and consolidation of political authority. One needs to keep in mind the recent rise of an extremist Naxalite organization in the name of 'Ganayuddha' in West Midnapore in this context. All will agree that it is not just one of those freak occurrences.

KEY WORDS Social transformation; tribe; political orientation; interaction pattern

ABSTRACT In the present context it may not be possible to treat social transformation independent of politically motivated action. In recent times, transformation of tribes along caste and community lines has slowed down to some extent and in some cases the process has been reversed. But the state and national

level politics have made the tribals of Midnapore increasingly dependent on the dominating political order established by the majority community and communities of non-tribals. This has created adverse reaction among them in the sense that they have found an alternative in the form of Jharkhand party to counter the political domination of the majority group. For the tribals, economic changes directed and controlled by the present socio-economic order have benefited only a selected few and as a result differentiation has become a component of the tribal life-style making them more vulnerable than ever.

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