

Stratification of Bastar Tribes

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ABSTRACT Caste system, ethnic formation and other religion-based communities speak of plurality in India, depicts a variety of cultural variations. Concerning Indian society the saying of 'unity in diversity', it is revealed that the diversity is not only distinctive feature of caste but it goes beyond, providing a typical stratification in the social order; while the world of Indian tribes, is conspicuously different than the caste society, which is conceived as egalitarian society. Instances of widespread social equality are common. However, differentiation in terms of inequality at social, economic, as well as political arena could also be annunciated and some of such trends got impetus after the establishment of close culture contact with the non-tribal, more so with the social system of caste. This may have sprouted the rise of social stratification among Indian tribes. The present paper highlights about the features of stratification among the Bastar tribes.

I

The concept of stratification refers to unequal rewards that are attached to position. According to Parsons "social stratification is regarded here as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior to one another in certain socially important respects" (Parsons, 1954, p.59). The idea towards Indian tribes is that it is an egalitarian society but practically it is only a myth. Changing scenario of social landscape may be observed through social stratification angle. When social scientists study the society from conflicting point of view his unit of observation is usually through caste, class and power etc. Recently Marxists social scientists focus their arena of study from agrarian relations, which is again a stratification point of view.

The tribal social stratification is altogether different from caste stratification of Hindu fold. Among caste system there is ranking or hierarchic system, purity and pollution concept and more so, caste are considered as a system functionally related together while in case of tribe, the picture is altogether different. Each tribal group is endogamous and ranking in the tribal group, therefore, is done in terms of individual, family and clan as structural unit.

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Now a day the tribal society like any other society is not homogenous because of changing scenario where modernization and industrialization plays a key role. It reveals from ICSSR Survey report (1972-74) on Sociology and Social Anthropology from 1969-79 that nothing was mentioned about tribal stratification. However in the middle of 70's Prasad (1975) discussed some aspects of stratification and interaction among Parhaiya of Palamou District of Bihar. Prasad (1975) also informed that the tribal groups have adopted a kind of caste like *jajmani* system. Shah (1976) has also informed stratification found among tribal groups of Broach and Panchmahal Districts of Gujarat. He said that due to forces of modernization and developmental schemes initiated by the government, tribal society has ceased to be homogeneous and egalitarian. Topno (1970) discussed stratification among Munda, in terms of impact of Hinduism and Christianity on the choice of names of children. Singh (1985) also mentioned that social stratification exists among the West Bengal and Bihar tribes. He opines that there has been internal differentiation among them and it was due to colonial transformation. He observed that tribal society has been changing his status towards peasant caste pole.

Orans (1965) study among the Santal also suggests rank is conceded by Santal from their neighbour due to psycho-social criteria which is based on structural – functional approach.

Bose (1981) identifies four distinct classes of peasants among the tribals of Gujarat, namely,

rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasants and agricultural labourers. At the bottom of the stratificatory system are the tribal agricultural labourers. A majority of agricultural labourers are landless, a few of them have less than one acre of land of poor quality which virtually means having no land at all and like landless labourers they also live by selling their labour power.

One very interesting finding about the processes of tribal social differentiation is that endogamous forces of division in the tribe that the people in the group witness are so strong that they have sharpened stratification. Dasgupta (2000) rightly observes the identity and conflict among the Bhil tribal women labourers who are involved in unorganized sector for their bread and loaf. The conflict among the studied Bhil group clearly reflects that the changes of occupation at industrial setup and impact of urbanization that breaks down the commitment to the traditional ways of living. Sarkar (2000) also observes cultural mechanism of ethnic boundary maintenance between the Dhodia of forest, hill tract, called as *rani-paraj* and the plain land Dhodia whose distinctive markers are obviously material wealth, possession of money and dress and social behaviour and this group are more exposed to communication and industrialization

II

Some of the aspects of social stratification are related to question of theory, structure and processes. The study of stratification in Indian society has mainly two orientation viz. (a) parameter of purity-pollution concept, sacred and hierarchy etc, while (b) the second orientation to stratification is dominant in economic and political sphere. In this field there are several studies in our country but sincerely speaking there is a lack of study on Tribal Stratification.

To understand tribal stratification it must be said that in Indian situation we must define and identify the structural unit of our study. This unit whether a person, a group viz., caste or a tribe has to be related to the basic questions of theory, structure and process of change.

Yogendra Singh (1985) in his report on Indian stratification observed that the theoretical and substantive studies concerned in India are oriented to the methods of (a) Structural-Functional, (b) Structuralist, (c) Structural-

Historical and (d) Historical-materialist or Marxist.

The studies on social stratification based on the Structural-functional method; treat caste as a hierarchical system. Caste system is viewed as a system of co-operation, while the structuralist approach to the study of social stratification may be characterized by the studies of Dumont (1970) – *Homo hierarchicus*. In social anthropology studies purely on tribal stratification is meagre. Social Anthropologists who have followed Dumont's structural approach are Desai (1948), Leach (1960), Bailey (1960), Sachidananda (1964) and Vidyarthi (1965, 1970). The main focus on such tribal studies has been to provide an ethnographic aspect of the tribes belonging to different ecological niche of the country. These studies have mainly restricted to the analysis of clan, kinship and religion, which reveals that their theoretical orientation was towards structural-functional and structural.

The third orientation in the understanding of Indian social stratification is structural-historical where structuralism has over looked historicism. Singh (1977) observes on this approach: such studies have two dimension viz. (i) Non-Marxist and (ii) Marxist. The Non-Marxist historical studies are again differentiated. Under the structural-historical approach a huge empirical data have been generated and is used by socio-cultural anthropologists. Within this theoretical framework most studies are primarily on caste and class. But now a day its horizon is extended towards the study on agrarian structure and peasantry. History in terms of non-Marxism has been extensively used by both Indian and foreign anthropologists posted in different parts of our country (like Risley, Dalton, Thurston, Crooks etc.) worked extensively on various communities of our country like tribe, caste in peninsular India. They used non-Marxist history to present a detail anthropological profile of the communities of our country.

Fourth orientation to the study of social stratification is Marxist approach, which is characterized by its features, dialectics, structure and historicism. It locates historical forces in the mode of production and production relations. The production relations and production forces are related to certain dialectics of history.

Desai (1977) who is a Marxist sociologist observed that the members belonging to this category of tribal groups were uprooted from their mode of production in the same way as were

millions of cultivators and artisans living in the multitude of unmitigated villages of pre-British India from their self-sufficient, self contained village community setting. During British period under the impact of new administrative, political and economic measures these tribesmen lost their moorings from their traditional age-old socio-cultural settings. A large section of them became pauper, which ultimately forces them to live in the status of bonded labour or serfs to the Zamindars, contractors or moneylenders.

Pathy (1984) has carried out researches in the tribal agrarian stratification. He argues that the tribal are a peasantry and working on this hypothesis he applies Marxian frame work of analysis and finally identifies following agrarian strata (i) landless, (ii) rich peasant, (iii) middle peasant, (iv) small peasant and (v) farm worker.

III

In Indian caste system rank concession is one of the parameter of purity and pollution. It rests on ideas and values. In short, the essence of caste system is that it is based on co-operation and rests on a system of hierarchy. According to Marriott (1965) caste ranking is determined on the basis of collective opinion concerning the placement of ethnic groups as corporate wholes, higher or lower than one another in precedence.

In the following lines tribal stratification needs a little clarification. There is nothing like tribal system as has been observed among caste system. Each tribal group is strictly endogamous. They provided specialize service from within their own specialists.

In tribal stratification ranks are not differentiated at the level of two or more tribal groups. On the contrary in the caste system rank differentiation is observed. In case of tribal stratification we would only observe the inequality among the individual properties of tribe, that is, the properties of individuals in terms of achievements, in education, economy, elite status etc. By tribal stratification we mean differential rank groups such as native groups, economically well off groups, vegetarian, non-vegetarian group, pure-impure blood of origins, (that is, inter caste marriages signify impure blood of origin), wearing of sacred thread etc. When the members of a tribal group attain specialization, differentiation in rank, there emerges social stratification. In the Indian context

when we discuss tribal stratification, we rank the position held by individual members within the endogamous framework of the tribes.

IV

Bastar district of present day Chhattisgarh is dominated by numerous tribal groups has long been isolated due to geographical barriers and lack of proper communication from the mainstream of Indian civilization. Of the total population 72.77 percent are tribals in the district, which includes various sub-groups of the Gond tribe, who possesses their distinct socio-cultural identity. The forest clad Bastar district is the homeland of tribes like the Abujh-Maria, Dandami Maria, Muria, Dorla, Dhurwa, Bhatra and the Halba. According to Grigson (1938) the Gond of high land are known as *meta-koitur* and low land as *dor-koitur* which indicates this classification is based on geographical situations.

Muria

It has been observed that the Muria near Jagadapur are somewhat different in their socio-economic behaviour from Kondagaon-narayanpur area to whom they consider superior in status. Even they try to avoid marital alliance with the Muria of Narayanpur area; perhaps, reason behind such is that the Muria of Jagadapur area are more exposed to modern world than their fellow brethren of Narayanpur. It is also noticeable that there is no *ghotul* (youth dormitory) system among the Muria of Jagadapur area while it is an identifying feature among the Muria of Narayanpur – Antagarh and parts of Kondagaon region. If we consider the social parameter to understand regional social hierarchy among tribal people of Bastar, it is revealed that the Muria occupy the highest position. The indepth study will show that the Muria of Jagadapur are simply advanced section of the Dandami-Maria or Bison-Horn Maria and use of the Muria identity is simply a process of sanskritisation or upward social mobility. In gondi Murias are called as *koitur*. Again, among the Muria there is one section known as Jhoria Muria who are confined usually to northern part, i.e., south of Kolur pargana, Narainpur, Benur pargana, Kurangal and the plain area villages of Chota Dongar pargana of Antagarh tehsil. Since they have a phratry (*bash*) system, the alliance

takes place only among *akomama* (wife' clan) group of themselves. It is also observed that though they have a *ghotul* (youth dormitory) system but they are very much akin to the Hill Maria in respect of their appearance, clan system (i.e. their clan have their own territory in which clan shrine resides) and clan gods are similar to Hill Maria (or Abujh-Maria), even their festivals are almost similar to those of the Hill Maria. On the contrary, their agricultural practice is highly advanced than that of the Hill Maria. It is also reported that some of their *dadabhai* (brother's clan) and *akomama* clans are similar to those of the Hill Maria, they may intermarry with the Hill Maria *akomama* as per their customary rule but in practice it is not possible due to geographical barrier like hilly terrain. Due to their closeness with the Hill Maria their rank is below than other Muria. The name Jhoria is not ordinarily used now-a-days. It is also found that all *koitur* in Bastar call them as the Muria and raised their social ranks above the Maria.

Maria

Marias are divided into two halves, viz, those who live in the hilly terrain are known as the Marhes or Abujh Maria and those who lives in plain area (usually river Indrawati makes the boundary) and south of Indrawati, are known as the Marias/Madias/Dandami Maria (or Bison-Horn Maria). Among these Maria groups Dandami Maria occupy the highest position by virtue of their developed technology of agriculture and absence of *ghotul* system among them. The emic view of the Hill Maria to the men of plains (including Muria, Jhoria Muria, Dandami Maria etc.) or low land, are known as *koitur*.

Bhatra

Usually the Bhatras are confined mainly at the north-east corner of Jagadapur, which is adjacent to Jeypore (Orissa). Many among them wear sacred thread, and this right was achieved by their ancestors in the past from the Raja of Bastar in whose feudatory state, Jeypore was also included. The tribe is becoming Hindu caste and divided into three groups, based on purity of their blood, that is, during marriage when one takes women from other tribes, he is regarded as impure. According to their social hierarchy these groups are (a) Amnit Bhatra or Bade Bhatra, (b)

Sargimundi or Majhli Bhatra and (c) Batamundi-Masnimara or Pit Bhatra or Shan Bhatra. Among them Amnit hold the supreme status. The Shan Bhatra holds the lowest status among them and are derogatively called as the Muria Bhatra. Again, on the basis of economic criteria the Sargimundi (who used to depend mainly on Sal tree and its products) and the Batamundi (who used to make bata, that is, reed baskets, mats etc.) are differentiated. Each of such group has a number of exogamous tetemistic clans (Sarkar and Dasgupta, 1996). According to their religious faith they are again divided into Jagatlok (those who are followers of traditional religion) and Bhagatlok (those who are converted into bhagat cult and wear saffron colour cloth, eat vegetarian food, devoid of taking liquor and overall lead a simple life). This is a kind of social mobility. The emic view of this section of Bhatra is consumption of vegetarian food has acquired higher social rank than non-vegetarian food among their brethren fellow.

Dhurwa

The majority of them live in south-east of Jagadapur. The Dhurwa are originally a section of Parja community, who claims separate identity by abstaining from taking beef from the beef eating Parja. The Bastar Parja beyond the Kolab-Sabari River in Sukma Zamindari Estate and around Mount Tulsidongri in Sukma and Jagadapur tehsil bordering Jeypore-Koraput of Orissa now identified themselves as the Dhurwa and recent being called the Parja. Infact the name Parja is corrupt Aryan term Praja (means subject) which differs from Raja or ruler. The Dhurwas are basket makers and their habitats are located in such places where bamboo groove is abundant. Grigson (1938) observed that there was another section of Parjas who he termed as Peng Parjas, were supposed to come with first Raja of Bastar from Warangal but confined to Jeypore Zamindari estate of Orissa which is very adjacent to the present settlement area of Dhurwas of Bastar; infact the river Kolab-Sabari forms the boundary between Orissa and Bastar District of Chhattisgarh

Dorla

The Dorla is a corrupt form of Dor-Koitor which means the Koitor with low lying habitat.

Koitor is a term used by most of the sections of the Gond tribe and this people are also a section of it. The Dor Koitor are regarded as inferior to the Metakoitor or hill koitor, and due to this reason the Dor Koitor changed their name from Dor Koi to Dorakoi or simply Dora or Dorla. In Telegu Dora means Chief or lord and it is the singular form of Dorlu (Hazra, 1970). They are also identified as Koya in adjacent Andhra Pradesh. They are strictly endogamous with exogamous phratries or *bash* or *gatta*.

Halba

In Bastar they are mainly concentrated towards northern and central part. It is believed that the Halba are the descendents of old paik militia (Shukla, 1992). It is also believed that they migrated from Warangal of Andhra Pradesh along with first King of Bastar.

It has been observed that they claim superior status over the Ghasia, Mahara, Maria and Gadaba and some other communities. During field investigation it is found that they are divided into two endogamous and territorial divisions namely, *Chhattisgarhis* and *Bastaria*. The Bastaria Halba are again divided into two endogamous groups viz. Purit or Jat Halba and Surit or Nani Halba. The Purit claim superior status over other, which is based on purity concept, that is, pure blood while the other is admixture of blood of other community. It has been observed that in some occasion at Madhota village the Purit Halba are sanskritised their way of life by wearing sacred thread.

V

With the passage of time the tribes are becoming class structures. With the adoption of agriculture by the tribal people for their subsistence, class formation is becoming the only major avenue of social stratification. Agricultural capitalism got accelerated after independence. Simultaneously, there increased the growth of commercial market economy, which is competitive in nature. The subsistence sector among the tribal groups has been changing towards market economy for which they are now inclined towards production of cash crops. The economic disparity among these tribes often creates rank determination.

Both Marxist and non-Marxist-Weberian scholars have analyzed the process of tribal stratification. According to non-Marxist approach the process of social differentiation among the tribal groups is a continuum from tribe to caste. By adopting the attributes of sanskritisation the tribal groups are achieving the corresponding status of caste (. Aurora, 1972; Bose, 1941; Bailey, 1960).

The Marxist approach on the other argue that the process of tribal differentiation is from tribe to class mainly peasantry. According to them homogeneity of the tribal society is a myth and not reality. The tribe always had some kind of primordial infrastructure of social differentiation. During British regime the feudal India there was gross uneven land distribution among tribes. Therefore, tribal differentiation is not from tribe to caste, rather it is from tribe to class.

From the above discussion it may be concluded that tribal social stratification makes clear that the structural unit of a tribe in our country is altogether different from the structures of caste or class. Conceptually both caste and class are considered as system of groups. On the contrary, tribal groups do not possess any system. Each tribe is an autonomous, endogamous, commensal – kin oriented – clan group. The direction of social stratification among the tribal groups as reported by Singh (1985), Jan Breman (1979) and Pathy (1984) clearly show the induction of agrarian modernization appears to have taken a firm base among the tribal people. The present authors personally feel that they (i.e., the Bastar tribes) are still in the scale of peasants (wolf, 1966) but not farmer. Gradually with the process of modernization their status from tribal pole to peasant pole is becoming witnessed at the moment. It is also expected in due course that after introduction of massive industrialization and communication system they will give rise to class structure (in terms of economic point of view) as found among the Dhodias of South Gujarat (Punalekar, 1980).

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