

Plurality and Rural Birbhum: A nuanced understanding
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I

My talk would centre around a small part of rural West Bengal, India specifically, the villages around Santiniketan, District Birbhum. The plurality or the composite nature is evidenced from the fact that various religious and social groups live side by side. Among the religious groups mention may be made of the Hindus, the Muslims and a small number of Christians, most of who are recent converts and are mostly from the Santal community. There is also a smaller number of Buddhists, mainly the Chakmas who come as monks from Bangladesh. The Santals, constitutionally considered a Scheduled Tribe could be taken as a social group. There are such other groups like the Koras, Mundas and the Mahalis. In contrast to the scriptural religion of the Hindus, Muslims and Christians, the religion of the Santals, Koras, Mundas or Mahalis is practised only through their traditional rites, rituals and ceremonies without having any scriptural foundation.

All these categories of people share, albeit differentially the common facilities and services providing education, health care, economic activities that is largely agriculture and small-scale trading, and most importantly, the local government systems and institutions. There is also sharing and participation, differentiated into direct and indirect, in the regional festivals and observances that are celebrated by different communities at different times throughout the year. These festivals and observances have a strong religious component but they seem to transcend those limitations reaching out to the masses. Every region evolves its own calendar of events and establishes regional patterns of festivals through which collective culture of the region is expressed. The regional culture is palpable but leaves spaces and provisions for the communities to sustain and continue with their own traditions, identities and cultures.

Among the communities the Hindus are dominant. The Hindus are hierarchically divided into a number of occupation-based castes and sub-castes. In most cases each caste used to have a traditional calling, e.g., members of Sadgop caste, fairly wide-spread in Birbhum, are cultivators by tradition. There are, to mention a few, traders, artisans, crafts persons and servicing castes. Castes are arranged along the 'purity-pollution' dimension. 'Purity-pollution' is determined by a number of social markers by which some castes are ordered relatively higher than others. These

markers have slight or more variations from one region to another. Wherever the region the one caste that has almost absolute supremacy is the Brahmin or Brahman caste, however, among the Brahmins there is evidence of ordering and intra-caste distance. I may mention here that this pattern of intra-caste distance and division is found in almost all caste groups among the Hindus.

On the basis of numerical strength the Muslims are placed next to the Hindus. Ideologically, though the Muslims profess to be equal among themselves under the aegis of their faith, Islam but with a little probing, social divisions and ordering can be identified. In spite of the claim of an inherent Islamic egalitarianism that otherwise pervades their beliefs, in practice there exists formidable gaps. The Muslims have an analogous system of caste-like division that is an outright aberration from the principles of Islam. This caste-like division appears to have emerged in response to the dominant Hindu hierarchy of castes. I have used the term analogous and soon I will mention the names used for the various caste-like groups but it needs to be kept in mind that the system among the Muslims is not homologous to the Hindu system of caste hierarchy that has a long tradition and scriptural support.

II

When people live in a plural set-up, they develop stereotypes about each other. The common adage, 'Familiarity breeds contempt' plays a significant role in construing passive and negatively felt prejudices about each other and these prejudices are shared along community lines. Below I cite a few examples.

Muslims, tribes and a few Hindu castes are considered by most Hindus as not maintaining clean habits mainly because they consume meat that is taboo for the Hindus. In the context of the tribes, over and above eating tabooed meat, they drink home-brewed rice beer, alcohol and toddy (fermented palm juice). These stereotypes are often used in building up the regional hierarchy of communities supported by Hindu concept of 'purity-pollution'.

In the Hindu order of caste hierarchy, the Santals are accommodated towards the lower end but strangely, slightly higher than the ordering of the Muslims. The reasons for this may be the willingness of the Santals to label themselves as Hindus and for the similarities they share with some Hindu groups while the Muslims are extremely cautious of getting absorbed into the Hindu order; they are more than prepared to aggressively stake their allegiance to their great

tradition and the ‘global brotherhood’ of Islam. In my opinion, historically the plural situation created the ambience of a shared heritage and culture.

POWER POINT SLIDE SHOW (include here)

III

I have given a picture of kind of plurality as observed in a very small area. Let me share with you the region’s demographic features and a few of my observations:

In the context of settlement pattern, it is common to encounter Hindu, Muslim and Santal (or other tribes) villages almost side by side in this region. There are villages composed of only Hindu castes and each of these villages mostly has a tribal hamlet situated on the periphery or at a distance from the main village. Castes ordered on the lower end of the Hindu hierarchy occupy separate zones in the village; very rarely would they be in the neighbourhood of the higher order castes.

A village that is dominantly inhabited by the Muslims would almost invariably have a Hindu population made up of the lower castes; in some cases we may find also a tribal hamlet in close proximity. There are villages consisting of both Hindus and Muslims and such villages are mixed in nature; neither the Muslims nor the Hindus are dominant in terms of numbers. In the Hindu villages the houses are spread out while in a Muslim village, houses seem to be crowded with little inter-house space. Houses in the Santal hamlets are usually arranged on either side of the main thoroughfare of the village. The types of houses in each of the villages, Hindu, Muslim or of the tribes have distinctive differences in the layout of the homesteads, courtyards, animal sheds, kitchens etc.

IV

I have earlier mentioned that there are caste-like divisions among the Muslims. The divisions are Sayyad, Sheikh, Pathan, Mogul, Jolha, Patua and Shah or Shah Fakir. I have used the term ‘analogous’ in understanding the internal dynamics within the Muslims where, I once again iterate that the Muslim divisions are not homologous to Hindu castes; however, the divisions are not entirely devoid of hierarchy, this has also been shown in the slide show. The Sayyads assume a status of exaltation relative to the others. Many of my Muslim informants/respondents

compared the exalted status of the Sayyad to that of the Brahmin with the justification that neither of them ploughs their fields with their own hands though they may be land-owning gentry. Most Muslim groups accord a low status to the Jolhas, Patuas and the Shahs.

The Muslim groups are traditionally occupation groups. The Sayyads, Sheikhs, Pathans, and the Moguls are cultivators; the Jolhas are weavers; Patua are scroll-painters and the Shahs are mendicants. These divisions are rarely seen to be living within the precincts of any single village and do not function as corporate groups of interacting structural units.

Among the Muslim divisions, the Jolhas, Patuas and Shahs have traditional means of access to the Hindus either through their profession or by their livelihood means. The Patuas in their scrolls represent Hindu gods, goddesses, myths and folklore about which they compose songs catering to the Hindu religious sentiments and beliefs; the Shahs wander from one village to another across communities singing songs of faith (Fakiri) and acts of 'benediction' in return of which they receive alms and the Jolhas by their very profession of weaving are an integral part of the organic society or *Gesselschaft*. This could help us to explain why and how the Muslims are accommodated in the Hindu order of communities notwithstanding the ranking accorded to them.

Now let me backtrack a little; all this while I have been discussing a collective ascription of place or rank in the hierarchy of communities relative to each other and as generally understood both from the point of occupation and 'purity-pollution' continuum. However, on an individual basis, respondents present an altered perception – the caste that he/she or the community to which he/she belongs is ranked 'higher' than the usual rank ascribed to them in the larger order. In support of this opinion he/she may cite the sub-divisions within his/her own 'caste' with its internal ordering and it is found that most respondents believe that they belong to the 'highest' among these sub-groups.

A few more observations: the Hindus and the Muslims aptly fulfill the requirements of 'homo hierarchicus' while the tribes seem to exhibit the characteristics of 'homo equalis'. The Muslims being in the midst of the hierarchic Hindus have developed a situational and operational model of castes in response to the Hindu order. The tribes, however, have had very little occasion or opportunity to take this as a matter of contention partly because of their natural

peripheral existence and the predominant characteristics of homogenous life experiences and community ethos.

The tenor of my presentation till now has been to demonstrate to you the regional forces that can influence the emergence of regional hierarchies that re-shape identities that cut across the lines of community but in spite of these strong cross-currents we need to remember and strongly emphasize that a Muslim child from his/her childhood is socialized with the Islamic ideology of egalitarianism and that all Muslims are equal in the eyes of Allah. This sense of egalitarianism and forged brotherhood that has the possibility of transcending immediate physical boundaries works to give the community the confidence of collectivity that in times of social 'crisis' or otherwise, situations, the response is not only quick but collective. These responses on the part of the Muslims are at times aggressive and give rise to social tension. On the other hand, the tribes faced with indignant situations and experiences tend to withdraw from confrontation.

One last point, among the Muslims economic standing and social mobility are very closely related to each other. A Muslim who acquires wealth and is overtly involved in charitable works is considered a good Muslim and also through these activities can acquire upward social mobility. There is a local saying that paraphrased says: 'Last year I was a Jolha; this year I am Sheikh; next year if prices rise I shall be a Sayyad' (translation adapted from Fredrik Barth 1960: 130). There is more dignity of labour among the Muslims. The upper caste Hindus who form the gentry (Bhadralok) try to shun manual labour; but the Muslim gentry formed out of their wealthier section (borolok) have no qualms in performing any manual labour. However, women of the Hindu or Muslim gentry avoid work in the field. Please note that the Muslims I have talked about are all Sunni and mostly of Hanafi mujab (Hanafi school of thought). Among the rural Bengal Muslims the Sunnis constitute the dominant group.

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