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**The Subsistence Academics
Of Indian Political
Anthropology**

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An anthropologist, whether a reluctant colonial or a radical activist, is intensely humanist and an explorer. He invariably follows a lonely trail, and in the process reaches isolated, archaic, exotic and at times a vanishing tribe. With the on-set of mass transportation and communication, discoveries, explorations and even adventures have become tamed affairs. However, anthropologists continue to be attracted to the unique institutions of the relatively small and isolated communities for their studies. And that is how a number of monographs are published on various institutions of such communities of the world. Among many others, anthropologists are interested in the political power and politics of the tribes and they have evolved a sub-discipline of their own, political anthropology. In this paper, firstly, we propose to comment on the nature of political anthropology as such. Secondly, we shall endeavour to examine the writings of political anthropologists in India. And lastly, we intend to explain the reasons for lack of a concerned and authentic political anthropol-

ogy in India. Our limited exploration through the writings of Indian Anthropologists takes us to an unflattering conclusion that what is claimed as political anthropological research is something like a subsistence academics, which passes off unnoticed.

Political anthropology, a sub-division of social anthropology, is concerned with description and analysis of the political system proper in societies regarded as primitive or archaic. David Easton did not find it existent in 1959, though he found anthropologists working on political matters pertaining to simpler societies (Easton D., 1959). He hastened to add that political institutions and practices were viewed as independent variables for their effects on other institutions and practices of the society of which they were part. He took pains to examine the *African Political System* (Fortes, M. and E.E. Evans Pritchard, 1940) in which 'political activity has relevance only for the preservation of the social order whether for good or for ill'. For example, Radcliff-Brown's Weberian functional bias was reflected in formulation of political activity as 'the organised exercise of coercive authority through the use or the possibility of the use of physical force relating to order in a unique way'. Thus, in Radcliff-Brownian formulation politics is identified as a function of a society, and not as a structural mechanism.

Charging anthropology for its failure in transcending the ethnocentric limits of the post Western political conceptualization, Easton found its major pre-occupation with the collection of data about political systems to help in the development of a useful typology. For such an exercise, exploration of the conditions under which varying degrees of differentiation arise is desirable: "To what extent, for example, does differentiation vary with the size of the society with its ethnic composition; with its mode of subsistence; with the frequency, volume and types of demands made; with the nature

of communication network; with the technical requirements for implementation of decisions; with the general attitudes towards authority, with social structure as evidenced in kinship and other kinds of relationships; with the types of personalities prevalent in the society; and with accessibility to the physical means for usurpation, rebellion and the conquests. These variables add up to the physical, social and psychological setting in which a political system must operate and to which it will respond." (Easton, D. 1959 : 243).

A decade after Abner Cohen found Easton's verdict on political anthropology irresponsible and damaging and charged him of misunderstanding the nature of the chosen theme (Cohen, A. 1969). It was mainly because of the fact that Easton ignored the vital point that political anthropology happens to be a branch of social anthropology, whose traditional subject matter has been 'isolated small society' tackled through 'holistic' approach. As such societies are undergoing fundamental political change, social anthropology is re-examining its aims, methods and significant questions on the nature of relationship between political science and social (political) anthropology: What can they learn from each other ? And what kind of division of labour and cooperation can be developed between them ?

The major interest of social anthropologists is not in one-sided effect of politics or non-political institutions. They generally seek to explain these non-political institutions in terms of political relations, as these symbolic institutions are largely rooted in the unconscious mind. The social anthropologist, by analysing the symbols of power relationships in small scale, pre-industrial societies has gained a great deal of insight into the symbolism of power relationships generally. "Anthropological analysis of symbols involved in development, organization and maintenance of various types of kinship relationships, of marriage, friendship,

patron-client relationships, corporate political groupings, ritual and of different systems of stratification, can give the political scientists working in industrial society significant concepts and hypotheses for analysing a whole range of informal political groupings and informal relationships" (Cohen, A. 1969: 228). These aspects have profound bearing on the term 'political culture' currently fashionable in political science. On the other hand, social anthropologists have ignored the importance of the modern state in the study of politics of small communities, a phenomenon besides concept of power, which has been a central theme for political scientists.

George Balandier, author of one of the earliest text books on political anthropology identified three principal claims of political anthropology: (i) a determination of the 'political' that limits it neither to 'historical' societies alone, nor to the existence of a State apparatus, (ii) an elucidation of the processes of the formation and transformation of political system by means of research parallel with that of historian; and (iii) comparative study, apprehending the different expressions of political reality, not within the limits of a particular history, but in its entire historical and geographical expression (Balandier, G. 1967 : 4-5). For him political anthropology led to decentralization and had broken the spell that state had long exerted on political theorists. It imposes a more dynamic conception favourable to consideration of history and conscious of strategies which any society (even an archaic one) must bear within itself. It also leads to a more critical consideration of the ideological systems by which traditional societies explain themselves and justify their specific order. It has collaborated widely in the critical work in dissociating political theory and the theory of the State. Such collaborations also reveal the by-ways of politics, which are present in the least organised societies and

in situations least favourable to its emergence. "All human societies produce politics and none are resistant to the historical process", (Balandiers, G. 1967 : 196). Lucy Mair, looking back on the course of development in political anthropology since 1940, confidently asserts : "We have come a long way, so far that some anthropologists, particularly in America, salute the pioneers only to repudiate them. *African Political System* was a bench mark, but now-a-days we order things better." (Mair, L. 1975 : 8).

Coming to the Indian situation, way back in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857, some British officials made efforts to look into more closely at the structure of Indian society, to discover how it was being changed by imperial policy and to construct a theory of Indian social development based on the methods employed by the early anthropologists (Oven, R. 1973 : 203). Alfred Lyall, one of the most influential men within the empire and in a position to make sure that his ideas did not go unregarded, used comparative method and anthropological concepts to project his notion of India. His efforts were aimed at maintaining differences rather than to attempting to create uniformity within the Indian society.

Anthropology, as such was introduced in the Indian academic establishment in 1920, but it remained inconsequential till 1950's. There were early individual Indian anthropologists such as S.C. Roy, L.K.A. Ayer, Hiralal, etc. who wrote under the patronage of the colonial administrators and even some of them were charged with pro-British leanings (Singh, K.S. 1984). Those of the few Indians, who went abroad for higher education in anthropology, went to the University of Cambridge. It was because among many, one of the reasons was that two British Indian administrators, T.C. Hodson and J.H. Hutton, were employed as senior faculty members after their superannuation in the depart-

ment of Social Anthropology. We have shown elsewhere (Sinha, A.C. 1988) the prevalence of pre-functionalist academic trends up 1950 at the Cambridge, which were imbibed by the Indian anthropologists. Not for nothing that on the whole "anthropology was a suspect as nationalist opinion regarded it as an instrument of colonial policy, either to create divisions among Indians or to keep sections of them insulated from nationalist force" (Srinivas, M.N. *et al.* 1986 : 34). In such a situation no anthropologist thought it worthwhile to undertake the study of politics of an Indian tribe.

Tribes and tribal areas were treated as a special preserve of the colonial administrators in a typical paternalistic style. At times, they were accorded the special attention that a handicapped child in the family is often singled out for. It were the anthropologists besides the administrators and the missionaries, who diagnosed the uniqueness of the tribes with a view to, setting them apart from 'others'. Naturally, 'others' perceived the anthropologists as the hand in glove in the decisive designs of the British. Soon after the Independence, the anthropologists identified themselves once again with the new regime with all eagerness and expectation. It was but a natural response to which no one should impute any ulterior motives. And they were not disappointed in their expectations. They were offered positions in the Anthropological Survey of India, Tribal Research Institutes, Community Development Projects, Tribal Development Blocks and the Assam State Administration under the tutelage of the Anthropological Adviser to the Governor. That was also the time when the development administration was pushing its effective control to the tribal frontier areas in the North-East, which had remained relatively isolated in the past.

What came out of the above development was reflected idealistically as the *Tribal Panch Shila* (Five Fundamental Principles) in which the author of the Phi-

osophy, (Elwin, V. 1957) called himself 'a missionary of the Prime Minister's gospel', who in return paid the compliments by acknowledging the influence of late Jawaharlal Nehru on him. These principles in course of time enlisted enthusiastic proponents and die-hard critics. This is not an appropriate occasion to review and assess them, but we would like to comment on the implications of the very first principle of the *Panch Shila*: 'People (tribes) should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them'. Have the administration, policy makers, tribals themselves and all the more—anthropologists—been able to identify the various facets of the special genius of the tribals—ideal for their development, which are distinctively 'tribal', setting them apart from 'others' ? Or is it a simple liberal platitude of an idealist humanist mind removed from the stark reality of practical life ? Or is it reflective of the political context exposing the ambiguity inherent in the Indian national approach to the ethnic minorities ?

A recent political analysis comes closest to the above scenario. "On the one hand, this frame (the Indian national approach to tribes) wants to preserve the uniqueness, distinctiveness and individuality of tribal systems. On the other hand, it wants them to come into the national stream. The assumption is that they can and want to transform themselves meaningfully because that would threaten the colonial order. The problem was simply reduced to one of law and order. If they left the colonial order undisturbed, let them be undisturbed. If they did threaten *Pax Britannica*, then the system sent armed forces to handle the problem. The political ambiguities inherent in our outwardly humanitarian position have led to our inability to articulate clearly political frame. Thus, systematic study of the political structures and processes of the tribal societies has not come to be really seriously cultivated" (Rao, K.R.

Raghvendra, 19: 1986). Not for nothing that emerging tribal scholars find four decades old efforts of 'developing' them as actually leading to 'decay' in their social fabric (Aeir, L. 1986). This undoubtedly has to be attributed to the vagueness built in to our perspective on tribal societies and their political systems.

The African continent was the scene for the British social anthropologists for their major studies based on intensive field work between the two World Wars. Of the two leading lights of the structural-functional anthropology in Britain, Radcliffe-Brown taught briefly at Capetown, while Malinowski travelled to Africa pleading for an increasing role for anthropologists in the colonial set-up vis-a-vis the tribes (James, W. 1973 : 61). Their presence in Africa, though brief, did stimulate publication of a number of monographs on religion, kinship, marriage and family, customary laws, land tenure, barter and trade, political system and even social change. Their contributions were acknowledged in various ways, specially what came to be termed as political anthropology in course of time was decidedly African in its origin. With a possible exception of Edmund Leach, who worked on politics of Highland Burma, no other social anthropologist claimed to have studied the politics of a tribe by then. So far India was concerned, by the time Easton wrote his famous piece on political anthropology, no Indian anthropologist had claimed to have worked on the political system of an Indian tribe in the conventional 'holistic' manner.

It is not that no efforts were made to study the politics of the tribal communities. In fact, certain works reminiscent of the search for the origin and re-interpretation of the Hindu polity and the Indo-Aryan aspects were undertaken in 1920's by Beni Prasad, R.P. Chanda, and others. However, though efforts were made to study tribal economy (Pant, S.D. 1935), religion (Roy, S.C. 1921), culture, etc. no full length monograph was

devoted to the study of tribal politics *per se*. It can also not be claimed that the tribes were restive. In fact, all over from the Burmese frontiers in the North-East, to the Afghan borders on the North-West and to Southern, tribes of the Deccan Peninsula had risen on the various forms of protests, uprising and revolts.

In all fairness though, it must be mentioned that politics of the tribes was not completely ignored by the anthropologists, who did write on various facets of the tribal politics since 1950's. Firstly, during the hey days of the village studies, factionalism at various levels was one of the dominant orientations in the study of tribes and castes. Secondly, political transformation of an ethnic group into a policy or formation of the State system was undertaken by a number of anthropologists (Sinha, S.C. 1962 : 1987, Mahapatra, L.K. 1970 : 1976, Sinha, A.C. 1985 and 1987). Recently, Surajit Sinha has edited a significant volume (Sinha, S.C. 1987) on the tribal politics and State systems in which historians and political scientists contributed besides the anthropologists. Thirdly, anthropologists along with historians, political scientists, sociologists and political activists wrote on various types of tribal movements (Singh, K.S. 1982; Goswami, B.B. 1979). Fourthly, studies on leadership, electoral participation and party politics among the tribals were also made. All these aspects were significant in their own ways, but not one of them could receive the treatment of a full length monograph on a tribe.

Among the studies of politics through holistic approach F.G. Bailey, though not an Indian anthropologist, stimulated a generation of anthropologists through his studies on Bisipara, a Khond village in Orissa (1956, 1957 and 1959). He not only provided an authentic ethnography on the Khonds of Phulbani district but also examined the changing economic frontiers of the village and the political interactions of the tribals in

terms of various neighbouring castes extended to the province and ultimately to the national context. A second study in this context was that of the *Political System of Jats* (Pradhan, M.C. 1966) in which caste, clan and lineage of an important caste were examined in terms of politics of Uttar Pradesh. A third study in this tradition is that of the A. Beteille's on caste, class and politics of Sripuram, a Tamil village (Beteille, A. 1966). A fourth one is that of Richard Fox's analysis on State hinterland relations in pre-industrial eastern Uttar Pradesh (Fox, R.G. 1971). And lastly, Sinha's study of elite and political development in terms of nation-building efforts in theocratic Sikkim (Sinha, A.C. 1975).

Among the studies mentioned above, only Bailey's works on Bisipara fall strictly in the typical anthropological tradition of micro study through holistic approach on an 'isolated' tribe. Beteille's study comes just next to Bailey's approximation in terms of the above criteria, but it is not the study of a tribe. Pradhan, Fox and Sinha's studies are not strictly microscopic in the typical anthropologist tradition. Moreover, they addressed themselves to more evolved non-tribal political systems at the regional levels. In this context, even Bailey's analysis and linkage of Bisipara extends beyond the village, region, and the province to the nation.

Nobody can possibly prescribe a fixed agenda for the future researches on the basis of the past models for all the time. In fact, it is desirable that anthropologists should choose their subject matter keeping in mind the changing times in a vast country like ours. They may innovate their strategy on research method depending on the demands of their chosen themes; and they may also evolve a complex conceptual model to analyse their data. The point is not that every anthropologist must replicate an '*African Political System*' for his chosen study. The issue to be examined is that of

carrying studies on the politics of tribes in anthropological tradition by trained anthropologists. And in this context, one fails to understand why there is not a single monograph on the politics of an Indian tribe during the last eight decades. And one need not have to go very far to look for the reasons:

With the coming of the Independence the handful of available anthropologists came handy to the new regime for their expertise on the tribal affairs. Besides their authentic, intensive and microscopic field work, the intense humanism of the discipline in terms of applied and action anthropologies attracted attention of the State. And thus, some anthropologists got engaged in the formulation of tribal welfare and development policies as well as in the implementation of programmes. In between the monographs were being published on the classical synchronic model and in 1950's non-tribal villages were studied through the 'holistic' approach as if they were tribal 'isolates'. Meanwhile, the discipline was expanding; new departments in the newly established Universities were opened; new research institutions were started. Consequently, demands for anthropologists' expertise were on increase steadily.

The craft of social anthropology in India has to address itself to certain relevant issues. In case the discipline insists, which it should do, that simpler (tribal) societies continue to be its central object of study, it must analyse the various aspects of tribal political dimension that have hitherto received attention. Naturally, anthropologists should be aware of the status of the tribals in the Indian political system as a marginal entity, who rarely influence the course of national politics in a decisive and meaningful way. Another important issue may be that anthropologists should ponder over nature of their discipline. In their humanistic concern for doing good to the 'tribes' through their expertise of action and applied anthropology, they are bound

to strike liaison between the State and the tribe, which invariably ends in favour of the State. Not necessarily one has to take up the cause of the tribes in extreme political situation as suggested by Kathaen Gough (Gough, K. 1968). However, no one would deny the possibility of conflicting situations between the State sponsored nation building programmes and tribal techno-economic requirements. In such a situation, the anthropologists have to ask themselves: Have they analysed the political economy of the tribal developments enunciated by the Central Government? In what ways their special constitutional status is being affected by their sheltered course of development prescribed by the existing mixed economy? Is it going on the prescribed criteria of the genius of the individual tribes? In the changed dominant values of 'development' and 'modernization' what specific contributions are they going to make in the nation-building of the emergent Indian plural polity?

Anthropological writings in India, by and large, present a situation which is far from satisfactory. Political anthropology is rarely taught as an independent paper in Indian Universities. Not many anthropologists claim to have specialized in this branch and those who claim to have some interests in the politics of the tribes, write stray articles. Very limited concerned efforts have been made in this regard. Anthropology continues to be a marginal discipline among the established disciplines as its thrust and, thus, identity is counted in humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The anthropologist, who studies the exotic, primitive, distant and marginal communities himself remains marginal in the national academic establishment. The students who offer to join the course are not among the better than an average stock. In such a situation what comes out in the name of anthropology rarely leads to a national debate; rarely influences the national course

of academic thinking and much less determines the national policies even relating to its own claimed preserve—the tribes. A few of the anthropologists, who were associated with formulation and implementation of tribal policies in 1950's, appear to be exceptions. It seems anthropologists carefully avoided uncovering the political aspects of tribal scenario. Thus, what is claimed and known as political anthropology in India is an apology for a serious academic exercise. In fact, what we do in the name of political anthropology, and to a lesser extent even for anthropology in general, is a type of subsistence academics, which passes off unnoticed.

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