

LEADERSHIP IN A TRIBAL SOCIETY

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Abstract : The author describes a case in which the traditional type of leadership is giving place to a new type of leadership emerging out of the Constitutional changes which have taken place in the country. He shows how the old and the new act sometimes in conflict and sometimes in co-operation with one another.

TRADITIONALLY, the secular and the religious leadership among the Santals are combined in one person incorporating the functions of legislature, judiciary and executive. The leader of the most important territorial unit, the village, is known as the Dharam Manjhi, who performs his duties with the help of the secondary officials like the Jug Manjhi and Kutum Manjhi. The chief is assisted in the execution of his political performances by a council of village elders. As the situation demands, he may summon a meeting at his residence to consider affairs relating to the village. It is customary among the Santals that the chieftainship is retained in the families of the first settlers of the village. The qualities for the succession to a chief are predominantly ascribed and to some extent achieved. The eldest son succeeds the father in his capacity as the next chief. If he fails due to lunacy, leprosy, murder, migration etc., the next eldest son takes the office. In case the chief dies issueless, his immediate brother or his next brother's eldest son or his next brother's next eldest son may be made the chief. With regards to the achieved qualities in a potential candidate for chieftainship, a wide knowledge of religious functions, a rich store of tales, legends, traditions, lores as well as intelligence and capacity to establish an efficient dialogue between the villagers are largely taken into consideration.

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The Santal village of Pargo-Tillaiya lies six miles west of Parasnath railway station in the district of Hazaribagh (Bihar). The village consists of four hamlets: Tillaiya, Garga, Hunarataru and Pargo. The first three hamlets are inhabited by Santals, while the last hamlet is inclusive of eight Kurmi (a backward Hindu caste in Bihar) families. There were 52 families and 200 souls in December 1964. There existed a constant conflict for dominating the political activities of the village between the leaders of the two dominant and early settlements, namely, Tillaiya and Pargo. The grandfather of Lepa and Shikari (religious and secular chiefs of Tillaiya respectively) and Haru Mahto (at present unofficial leader of the Kurmis of Pargo) had been the leaders of their respective hamlets in their days. The fathers of the present leaders of both the hamlets succeeded their grandfathers in the leadership after their death. Even in the past, there was struggle between the two hamlet-leaders while representing the entire village outside. The Santals of the other two hamlets, who were comparatively new settlers in the village, sided with the Santal leadership of Tillaiya. Even the Santals of Pargo could not favour the Kurmi leadership of their own hamlet and made a common cause with the rest of the Santals of the village. On the other hand, the Kurmi leadership could muster the support outside their own village among the local Baniyas, low caste Hindus, and officials of the zemindars. The Santal leadership was supported by the entire Santal population of the village.

With the advent of the Government-sponsored Gram Panchayats (village councils) in the rural areas, it became imperative for Pargo-Tillaiya to settle the leadership conflict once for all. The village was to select one representative for the official village council of Tengarakhurd, in which six neighbouring villages were organized together. With the thumping majority of the Santals, it was deemed that non-tribals would lose the battle of leadership. The religious chief of Tillaiya, Lepa, was thought to be too old, lacking contacts with the outside world and not sufficiently familiar with officials. With the new demands of the hour, it was thought

necessary that the Santal leadership should be an effective means of communication between the villagers and officials as well as the village council. Meanwhile a dramatic incident happened. The Raja of Ramgarh (a political leader and powerful zeminder of Ramgarh, 125 miles west of the village) paid a visit to Tillaiya in search of volunteers. Incidentally, Shikari Manjhi (the younger brother of Lepa, who had worked in Assam for years in his youth, a man of commanding personality and wide contacts in and around the village), represented the villagers in his talks with the Raja in lieu of his brother. Traditionally, it was Lepa's privilege to receive some dignitary from outside the village. Perhaps the Raja mistook him for the chief of the village and crowned him with his own turban. Shikari went to Patna to attend the convention of the Rightist opposition leaders, headed by the Swatantra Party. The journey to the state capital, participation in the deliberation in which ex-Lieut. Governor (*Chote lat*) and Ex-Governor General (*Bare lat*) were present, and, moreover, the pomp and splendour of the festivity enriched Shikari's store of tales as a measure of his contacts with the outside world. It enhanced Shikari's prestige tremendously in Tillaiya and its neighbourhood among tribals and non-tribals alike.

In addition to the ascribed potentiality for the leadership, the achieved qualities favoured Shikari to represent the tribal community. His elder brother, yet holding the chair of the Dharam Manjhi (religious chief) did not appreciate Shikari's increasing influence. But Shikari always respected the wishes of his elder brother, which was ultimately reciprocated by the latter. This led to the Shikari's unanimous election to the membership of the judicial bench of the Tengarakhurd village council, and the Kurmi leader Haru Mahto ultimately gave in. A situation soon developed in which the team of these two brothers emerged as a corporate one, supporting the traditional as well as Government-sponsored leadership. For instance, when Shikari proposed that the authorities should be approached for the establishment of an elementary school in the hamlet, which was also advocated by Haru Mahato in favour

of his own hamlet (Pargo), Lepa not only gave his moral support to Shikari but also actively propagated the idea in and round the village. Shikari was wise enough to discuss the problems relating to the village to be put in the meetings with the leaders of the rest of the hamlets. It made him all the more popular among the villagers.

But everything did not go on smoothly in Shikari's favour. Lepa's only son, Naika was rising as a potential threat to Shikari's leadership. For him, his paternal uncle's leadership was obviously not in accordance with Santal traditions. But peculiarly enough, he did not actively oppose Shikari's leadership. Since he counted much on the traditionally ascribed sanctions behind him for the village leadership, he was constantly engaged in enlarging his contacts with the outside political forces and assiduously nursing the hope of one day becoming leader of the villagers. In the meetings of the village council (to which he is not an elected member), his presence would be marked as an audience; he often paid visits to the petty block officials and provided them with small gifts like eggs, chicken, vegetables, ghee etc. The climax was reached when the Communist Party of India launched an agitation against the Government's food policy in August 1964. Naika participated in this agitation as a volunteer at Giridih (about 35 miles north-west of Tillaiya), and suffered imprisonment for about two months. When he came back, his knowledge, his activities and importance already increased. He was obviously a much talked of man in the village during the present investigation. Soon after, he was considered to be number two (only after Shikari), and at times number one, in the village in the eyes of petty officials, especially the Police. He was most active among all the members of the new generation in the village. He had never challenged his uncle's leadership, but he was industriously nourishing the hope of competing successfully against Shikari's son in the future struggle of village leadership, when Shikari would be no more.

To sum up, the present case-study may be understood to present a simultaneous four dimensional continuity. At first,

it appears to be a conflict between the two early settled hamlets, Tillaiya and Pargo. At the root of the support rendered to the Tillaiya leaders by the other three hamlets was the Santal tradition in which the first settlers' families maintained the privilege of leading the village in religious, political and other communal aspects of life. It also involved a conflict of leadership between tribal and non-tribal communities. In this conflict the Santals relied mainly on their majority in the village, and also sought the patronage of the neighbouring Hindu aristocracy. The non-tribals had always maintained a bridge between the majority ethnic group and the minority (themselves) mainly due to their superiority complex. And they tried to seek the support of the neighbouring non-tribal peasantry, which proved to be futile with the advent of majority rule in the village councils.

If we look from another angle, the conflict between the traditional and Government-sponsored leadership will be evident. Here the Government-sponsored leadership has also the backing of the traditionally ascribed qualities, since Shikari is from the same ruling family which had been leading the village in the past. Apart from his ascribed qualities, he (the Government-sponsored leadership) has been also able to achieve the patronage of the Hindu aristocracy, which added to his popularity. And thirdly, he has got certain personal qualities for a successful leader, like commanding personality, seeking advice from all elderly persons, and raising the voice of his people in meetings with the officials. That is why, we note the traditional as well as Government-sponsored leadership working in collaboration with one another.

Ultimately, it presents a conflict between the old and new generations in the political leadership. The present secular leadership of the village in the hands of the old generation was mainly due to the achieved qualities in the person of Shikari, which was also coupled with ascribed sanctions behind him. The new generation is trying hard to achieve those qualifications by enlarging its area of influence in the secular sphere. It is interesting to note that the new generation hardly thinks it necessary to put emphasis on the religious aspects of

of the leadership. In the changed situation, unlike in the past, the community leadership has become more secular than religious on boosting up of their secular influences ; the old as well as the new generations, both are trying to gain the patronage of secular forces outside. It is a mere coincidence that the old generation has aligned itself with one of the most conservative parties in Indian political life, while the new generation chooses a party which stands for a radical change in the present Indian society. No doubt, the old generation is at the helm of affairs, but the new generation is posing a formidable threat to the former's leadership.

The immediate neighbours of the tribals under the present study are the non-tribal Hindu peasantry, which represents a peculiar blending of the regional little traditional as well as the Indian great traditional dimensions. A minute comparison with the low caste neighbouring Hindus and an analytic study of the ethnic organizations of the Santal under the purview of the present paper reveal that the settled agriculturist Santals are least distinguishable from their immediate neighbouring peasant society. The present case study strongly illustrates that the Santals are fast becoming integrated with the Hindu peasantry of Chotanagpur.

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