

**GENDER-FREE SUBALTERN SOCIETY: MYTHS AND REALITIES**

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There is a misconception among eco-feminists that male hegemony builds up with the growth of modernism in society. They argue social and economic changes render the traditional narratives of gender equalities and marital set up inadequate, forcing the limitations and ideological implications of male-conscious gender-biased theories as a social norm which is called patriarchy. Hence eco-feminism addresses environmental problems from gender-conscious perspectives and allows literary and cultural studies scholarship to draw attention to the impact historically- and culturally-specific conceptualizations of nature have had on women<sup>1</sup>.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" focuses on the conceptualizing and world-shaping power of language and texts in order to show how far the environmental crisis related with modernism must be regarded as a cultural crisis and how far literally/textual analysis can contribute to an understanding of its emergence and to the development of remedial measures. Later this idea encourages other anthropologists to prove how modern civilization stands against gender equity. Sometimes their attempts are regarded as synonymous with a movement and revolution to defend and promote issues those are sometimes raised by patriarchy to make women as more oppressed and subaltern.

Recently I read a research paper of Dr. Anil Kumar Mohapatra, HOD, Department of Political Science at Government Women's Jr. College, Jeypore, titled as "Theory of Feminism and Tribal Women: An Empirical Study of Koraput" published by Medknow Publications<sup>2</sup>. The first line of the abstract of that research paper cited in the mainstream culture, to identify oneself as a "feminist" has been a fashion. And at the end of the research paper, the researcher raised four questions:

1. Is a society which shows respect for women always either a primitive or backward society?
2. Are modernization and development responsible for the deplorable position of women in society?
3. Were primitive societies feministic?
4. Is feminism as a movement confined to the modern civilized world alone?

This paper was intended to analyze Dr. Mohapatra's research methodology and conceptual output and I am grateful to Central University Amarkantak for providing me a stage to keep my views on the floor.

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Dr. Mohapatra focused his research on tracing the status of women in three tribal communities in the undivided Koraput district of Odisha with a survey which includes 180 subjects from three communities, conducted during mid-January to mid-February 2008 with the assistance of Mr. Gobardhan Panda, Founder Secretary of Banabasi Bhasa O Sanskruti Gabesana Kendra, a centre for tribal language and research. He chose three aboriginal tribes of the undivided Koraput district, namely the Banda, Holva, and Saora tribes. He used the "Michelin Guide" to measure the lifestyles of three tribes.

In his study, he found among the Holva, Saora and Bonda tribes, feminist tendencies were present in varying degrees. Holvas were less feminist than Saoras, but Bondas were more feministic than Saoras. Calculating the P-values of the three tribes, his survey concluded how in a relatively advanced tribe, feminist principles were followed less. The P-value calculated ( $P < 0.05$ ) was found to be quite below the average difference among the three categories of data; this difference seemed very significant scientifically. Holvas were more modern and economically strong than the Saoras and the Saoras were more robust than the Bondas.

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Out of four hundred thirty-seven varieties of tribes in India, sixty-four belong to the state of Odisha. Linguistically, the tribal population is divided into 4 categories: (1) Austric speakers, (2) Dravidian speakers, (3) Tibeto-Burmese speakers, and (4) Indo-Aryan speakers. Except the Tibeto-Burmese speakers, the rest of the varieties are present in Odisha. A major portion of tribes dwell in the hilly and forested regions of the state. Traditionally, their economy for subsistence was mainly based on a combination of hunting and collecting with shifting cultivation. But now, there is rampant industrialization and mining operations, which resulted in the uprooting of many tribal villages resulting in millions of nomads deprived of their natural habitat surroundings. They have lost their traditional occupations, agricultural land, and homes as a result of this industrialization. The urbanization culture also metamorphosed them to be more so-called 'civilized,' whether they liked it or not.

Holvas are an advanced lot, having undergone a process of "modernisation." They are mainly found in the Undivided Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Odisha. According to the 1991 census, the population of Holvas in Odisha was 30,662, out of which 11,732 of their population resided in the Undivided Koraput district. They speak a dialect called "Halvi," but are also capable of speaking the Oriya language without difficulty. The pattern of dress and ornaments among the Holva are the same as their Hindu neighbours.

In case of the second group under the study, the Saoras are known as one of the oldest tribes in Odisha. The population of Saoras was 404,000 in Odisha, according to the 1991

census, 21,064 of which reside in Undivided Koraput district. They are known for their artistic skills and traditional Panchayat system, which is responsible for maintaining law, order and solidarity in their villages.

The third discussed tribe, the Bondas, are quite primitive in comparison to the Holvas and Saoras. However, the Bonda people do not have mobility and are basically separated from the world around them due to where they live. They are divided into two groups: Lower Bonda and Upper Bonda. The Lower Bondas live in the foothills in the multi-caste/tribal villages under the symbiotic pressure of the surrounding peasantry while the Upper Bondas live in the mountain and hilly ranges covering about 50 square miles (about 81 square kilometers) known as the Bonda Hills with an elevation varying from 2,000 to 4,000 feet (about xx meters) in two Grampanchayats, namely Mudulipada and Andrahal. Because of their topographical surroundings, they are confined to that area.

According to 1991 census data, they were 6,863 in number of which 3,257 were males and 3,606 were females. They speak a language called Remo. Agriculture and forest collection are the principal sources of livelihood of the Bondas. Other sources of livelihood are gleaning, hunting, fishing, animal husbandry, and wage earning.

Bondas are one of the most backward tribes and are extremely aggressive in nature. They are still away from mainstream civilization and prefer partial to full nudity; women often hide only their genital parts. Modern civilisation has not changed the Bondas very much. They have preserved themselves, comparatively unaffected by the march of civilisation and still maintain their primitive social customs and traditions. Their literacy percentage has been calculated to be as low as 14 percent against 7.36 percent for tribes and 26.18 percent for the general population of Odisha.

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To measure the lifestyle and standard of living according to modern civilised society, the researcher used the Michelin Guide Scale. Michelin is a French tyre company owned by André Michelin and his brother Édouard Michelin. They started the Red and Green travel guides in 1933; the Red Guide presents awards to restaurants for their cooking.

Later, anthropologists adopted these guidelines to measure lifestyles of people. Today, relativism has retreated from an empirical statement to a methodological precaution. As Michael F. Brown suggests in a recent article in *Current Anthropology*, anthropologists have ceased to adhere to the thesis people live in different worlds and only consider relativism as the practice of suspending judgment until a belief or practice can be understood within its total context.<sup>3</sup> Cuisine may be one of the few domains in which empirical relativism is still fully valid.

Adivasi usually prefer to drink the juices of salap trees and their cooking and eating habits differ from the Western world. In fact, all the East observes a different mode of cuisine style. So the *Michelin Guide* prepared a different guide book for Hong Kong-based restaurants. Above all, the guide, itself remains a controversial one and its use in

Anthropology is also controversial. It's not proper to judge the Adivasi in term of "Michelin Guide Scale".

The researcher found Bondas more inclined towards gender-free social customs by their marital practice. Bondas also differ from other aboriginal tribes in the case of marriage. In the Bonda tribe, the usual/customary practice is a Bonda woman between 16-20 years old marries a male (boy) between 12-14 years old. This is how a relatively mature woman (who is usually older than her spouse) exercises control over the latter. Therefore, it is the women whose opinions get precedence over male spouses with regard to household matters. This marriage system is thus a peculiar one. There are specific dormitories meant for boys and girls for this purpose, which serve as matrimonial agencies to facilitate selection of spouses. Usually, older girls prefer to marry boys younger than them so that the latter would earn for them when the former grew old. Hence the researcher claims in comparison to other tribes of undivided Koraput (now Malkangiri) and Bastar districts of Odisha and Chhatisgarh, Bondas have less of an issue of patriarchy.

As after marriage the household dominance remains with wife, the researcher marks it as a significant representation of a matriarchal society. But actually Bondas, like all other tribes of Odisha, observe a patriarchal system. It is an astonishing fact except for two features (the marital practices and clothing habits) there is not a significant difference in means of livelihood between all three discussed Adivasi.

The researcher never tried to verify the feminist queries asked in his interview/survey of 180 subjects of which 37 percent of women preferred not to answer the questions, or to be more specific, were rather shy to answer the questions regarding feminism. These silences seemed to the researcher as "to be natural, given the cultural mindset of women in general in a society where they usually would not appear to be making any sort of complaint about their husbands." The researcher seems to be somehow more confused with these silences of women folk, as he writes, "Although it may appear that the reason behind their silence could be that they were afraid of their husbands or they did not like to appear as protesters, but to this researcher this reasoning is not convincing. Maybe these women have not experienced domination or harassment by male folk or husbands or they could not visualize such situations in their wildest imagination; so they preferred to remain shy and silent."<sup>4</sup>

But let us validate other aspects of feminist theories in the lives of Bonda women and verify how they are in a gender-free society in comparison to other aboriginal tribes. Actually any feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and normally focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. It is inadequate and improper to reach a final prejudicial statement before starting any research. To mark any social concept a 'fashion' never justifies any serration in authenticated proof. However, if anyone would try to evaluate a feminist truth, he/she must first locate the theories within their historical, societal, and cultural contexts.

So judging the effects of feminism in subaltern groups or primitive tribes, also known as Adivasi, we must ask and answer the following questions:

1. Are the hill people feminists in their attitude, behavior, and way of life?

2. What are the attitudes of male tribe members to female tribe members?
3. Are tribal females conscious about their social status and disadvantages?
4. Have they ever projected as or considered to be activists?
5. Is the society/culture in which they live considered to be patriarchal in nature?
6. What is their approach to the birth of a girl child in their family?
7. What are the expectations of tribal parents of a daughter?
8. What are the expectations of tribal parents to the education of their female child(ren)?
9. What is their approach to property possession and inheritance by tribal women?
10. Do tribal women having access to modernization?
11. What political role are tribal women taking now after the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments followed by the complying Acts of the Government of Odisha which has secured 33 percent reservation for women (in political activities)?
12. What are the impacts of polyandry on the status of women in tribal society?
13. What impact has been put on tribal women by self-help groups (SHGs) etc.?
14. Are these issues to be covered by the proposed study?

The status of these tribal women from a cross-cultural view is really complicated. Their 'status' may be defined in terms of more than one criterion such as production; activities; relative qualities or attributes valuable for a society possessed by men or women; economic independence; economic control; political participation; the role of religion; legal adulthood; property rights; personal autonomy; and ideological position.<sup>5</sup> Though there is dominance of Bonda women in household matters, they have no significant political and religious role in their culture.

At the village level, a Naik is the village headman and is assisted by the Sisa (the priest), Challan and Barik (the messengers) while performing his dutird for the cause of the villagers. There is also the Dishari, who is the official astrologer of the community, and whose function is to fix the date of festivals, and to perform rituals at the time of birth and death of any member of the community. No woman would ever be considered to hold any of these posts. So social participation for women in a Bonda community is traditionally denied. Women are even barred from performing Puja, touching deities or their sacred stuff as they are considered impious because of their menstruation cycles.

Though Bonda women are the real breadwinners of the family and they are allowed to attend nearby weekly market to sell and buy their goods, they are not allowed to plough, hunt, or participate in warfare. In case of any imprisonment or long-term separation from her husband, a Bonda women often runs into financial crises as she is barred from ploughing and cannot earn more from cultivation but has to feed her kids all the same. Another economical setback for Bonda women is neither do they have any right over their paternal property nor do they have any property rights owned by their in laws house in the case of divorce.

In matters of sexuality, Bonda women are often neglected because when a woman marries at 20 years old, her husband would be only 10 to 12 years old. When her husband

reaches 20 years old, she might be more than 30 years old. This inadequate matching makes Bonda women lead unhappy marital sexual lives.

Bonda men are often arrogant in nature and these aggressive instincts lead them toward criminal activities. Stealing, looting and killing had been the general attributes of Bonda males before Independence. The rate of criminal activities is slowly diminishing with the effort of Governmental policies to bring them in to mainstream culture. Ray writes: Bonda man lives for one day and starts his life afresh the next day, since every night he dreams of death instead of life, as murder is too common phenomenon in Bonda world, just as child birth is common in our part of the world.<sup>6</sup> If her husband commits any crime, is convicted for that crime and serves time in jail, he makes his wife promise to faithfully wait until his return and not to go with any other men while he is locked up. The woman has to obey monogamy in order to keep her promise. Hence, a Bonda woman suffers an oppressed sexual life throughout her marital relationship.

So in no way we can say Bonda tribes are gender-free and also it is unreasonable to claim other aboriginal groups are also hegemony-free and the modernization would lead them to a patriarchal outlook. Patriarchy is a confirmed status for these communities and whatever freedom is allocated to women is for the benefit of the masculine mass. There is no way any relationship of gender-free attitude within the social custom of any tribal community including Bonda tribes.

So, the question of modernization versus feminism or the prejudicial idea feminism is a fashion and doesn't exist with or work for these ethnic groups are all biased, unauthenticated, and prejudiced hypotheses.

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