Women and Gender in the Study of Tribes in India

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Concern for a focus on women in tribal studies has been very recent. It emerged out of general interest and concern with women's issues the world over. The value system governing larger Indian society has been in the process of change. With this there has been a shift in the image of tribal women who are thus invariably portrayed as enjoying a better social status than their counterparts in the larger Indian society. Tribal society in the post-Independence era has been witness to unprecedented change, which has been most marked in respect of culture, modes of making a living and social differentiation. Their bearing on women's status in society and gender relations has been far-reaching. The article attempts to highlight the issues involved on the basis of existing ethnographic accounts.

Introduction

The study of groups, that subsequently came to be described as tribal studies, began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1874. Since then, scholar–administrators have been writing general works on the land and people of different regions.[1] The need for a census (begun in 1871) by the colonial government invariably led to a collection of detailed and classified information leading to the identification of certain groups of people as tribes.

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Though the criteria used for the purpose were initially ambiguous, somewhat clearer ones have been introduced since 1901. Tribes were identified and described as those who practised animism. Later, the expression 'tribal religion' was used instead of 'animism'. Subsequent census enumerations continued with this criterion but other dimensions like geographical isolation and primitive conditions of living were added to it—though they were never explicitly employed in the census delineation of tribes. What was explicitly employed, however, was the aspect of religion that was described either as animism or tribal. Social anthropologist G.S. Ghurye considered this way of marking off tribes inadequate and unsatisfactory. He drew attention to the fact that caste Hindus, especially those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy, had in fact elements of animism within their religious practices (Ghurye 1963).

Together with the census, British officials made elaborate inventories of tribes. Anthropologist L.P. Vidyarthi describes the initial phase of tribal research in India between 1874 and 1919 as the formative period. The other two phases are identified and described by him as constructive (1920–49) and analytical (1950 onwards). The former is traced to the period when anthropology was introduced into the curriculum of Indian universities and the latter to the adoption of analytical and action-oriented approaches in the study of tribes (Vidyarthi 1982). Ethnographic accounts in the form of monographs, handbooks or inventories have been the hallmark of the first two phases of tribal studies in India and provide detailed information on different aspects—economic activities, systems of marriage, family, kinship, religious practices, technology, arts, artefacts, taboos, customs, patterns of inheritance, succession and so on. In the post-Independence period, there has been a flood of literature on tribes that has come mainly from three sources: the Anthropological Survey of India, university departments of Sociology and Anthropology and Tribal Research Institutes set up in states with a substantial tribal population. These were established in the mid-1950s, mainly to undertake problem-oriented research for effective formulation and implementation of developmental programmes in tribal areas.

Tribal Women in a Traditional Setting

It is from these accounts that women's position in tribal society has been mainly worked out as studies on tribal women per se

have not been many nor of much depth. In 1978, the Indian Anthropological Society brought out a regionwise survey of tribal women. It points out that studies of women have either been ignored or, when discussed, such discussions have been brief and sketchy.[2] Except in some works by Elwin, Furer-Haimendorf and a few others, there has been no explicit discussion on the 'status of women' in tribal society. Even in these, the assessment of the status of women has been far from uniform. While some say that tribal societies generally assigned high status to women, others opine that women's position in tribal society is the same as in other societies. Writing about the Nagas, Elwin, for example remarks, '. . . tribal woman is in herself exactly the same as any other women, with the same position, love and fears, the same devotion to the home, to husband and children, the same faults and the same virtues' (cited in Zehol 1998b: 1). Yet elsewhere, he refers to Naga women as holding a high and honourable position. They work on equal terms with men in the fields and make their presence felt in the tribal council (Elwin 1961: 104). Elwin makes a similar observation with regard to the Baigas when he says that the women enjoy an excellent position in society. They enjoy freedom and authority, play a leading part in marriage ceremonials, and have a reputation for practising witchcraft. Among the Baigas, there is no clear division of labour between men and women (Elwin 1986: 235–36). Furer-Haimendorf on the other hand, referring to the Nagas, writes,

> many women in most civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages. (Furer-Haimendorf 1933: 101)

In a similar vein, J.H. Hutton attributes a higher social status to Sema Naga women on the grounds that marriages among the Sema Nagas are choice-based and a girl is never married against her will. Such a woman occupies a high position in her husband's house and is treated well (Hutton 1921: 183).

Over the last two decades there has been a steady rise in the number of studies dealing with tribal women. In 1988, some articles in a collection of papers by Singh, Vyas and Mann dealt with tribal

women, while in 1993, a special number of the journal *Social Change* was on the 'Status of Tribal Women in India'. These recent studies provide a more careful rendering of the situation of tribal women than the ones presented in the earlier accounts. One can see this in the works of Chauhan (1990); Mann (1996); and Zehol (1998a). The more recent writings also mark a departure from the earlier ones on the status of tribal women. These are now increasingly moving in the direction of what in social science literature is described as gender studies. Issues dealt with in these studies are discussed later.

The discrepancy in the description of women in tribal society is mainly due to the way that scholars conceive the term 'status'. One can discern two broad views. The first refers to women's role in the system, which entails rights and duties. In this, status is linked with a role in the system. Correspondingly, women's status is analysed and assessed, taking into consideration the mutual duties of the sexes and the safeguards provided for the protection of each sex against the high-handedness of the other. The other usage of the term status is in the sense of prestige and honour, which may be studied in terms of their legal status and opportunities for participation. In the studies of women, however, such a distinction is often overlooked.

Status as 'prestige' and 'honour' can only be studied in relation to values. Tribes have been primarily studied either with reference to the values of the European Enlightenment viz. freedom, equality and fraternity or in relation to values prevalent in the dominant society. In short, in studying tribes in relation to the Other, values have invariably been either the universal values of the Enlightenment or the values of the larger Indian society in which freedom is often scorned and hierarchy is much valued. Hardly any attempt has been made to study them in terms of the values prevalent in tribal society.

Women in Changing Tribal Society

Some sociologists and social anthropologists have questioned the dichotomous conception of Indian society constructed during the colonial period. The British administrator–scholars conceived tribes as those who not only practised animism/tribal religion as opposed to Hinduism but also as those who lived in complete

isolation, without any interaction with the rest of the society or civilisation. Though the distinction is maintained between 'tribe' and 'civilisation', the two are not treated as isolated but in interaction with each other (Sinha 1958). Consequently tribal society has not been viewed as static but in the process of change. Change has been conceived as moving in a number of directions. Of these, the tradition that has been dominant has been one that has focused on change from tribe to caste. In fact, much of the social anthropological discourse on tribes has been primarily couched in terms of transformation of tribes into castes.

Changes occurring in tribal society have invariably been conceived of in terms of tribes moving in the direction of becoming a part of 'civilisation', by getting assimilated into the society the civilisation represents. Historians and anthropologists have made such observations not only in the context of the past but also in the context of the present. For instance, historian D.D. Kosambi (1975) has referred to tribal elements being fused into the general society. Similarly N.K. Bose (1941) makes a reference to tribes being absorbed into Hindu society. The fact that such claims have dominated a large number of anthropological works of the post-Independence era points to the persistence of the belief that tribes are being absorbed or assimilated into Hindu society or that tribes are gradually turning into castes. In this journey towards absorption or assimilation, tribes are said to be at different levels or stages. These have been reflected in the classifications put forward by social anthropologists for understanding tribal transformation in India. The classification has been couched differently by different scholars. To illustrate, B.K. Roy Burman, for example, classifies tribes as those (1) indifferent to Hindu society, (2) negatively oriented, (3) positively oriented and (4) incorporated into Hindu society. L.P. Vidyarthi too classifies tribes as those living in (1) forests, (2) rural areas, (3) semi-acculturated, (4) acculturated and (5) assimilated (Roy Burman 1970; Vidyarthi and Rai 1977).

Tribes have not moved only in the direction of Hinduism and the Hindu way of life; there has been an equal movement towards Christianity. Yet little is known about how such changes have affected the lives of women in these societies. How have women, whose families have been acculturated to Hinduism, adapted to the ethos of the new religious organisation? What has been the extent of continuity and discontinuity? Or what have been their

advantages and disadvantages in changed situations? These questions have not been systematically explored in the existing studies. However, studies on the Sanskritisation process among tribes do point to some changes.[3] B.K. Roy Burman, drawing upon the studies of many scholars done from the 1930s to1960s, demonstrated how, with Sanskritisation, tribes were opting for early marriage as a matter of prestige, and discouraging widow remarriage as well as divorce and separation (Roy Burman 1988: 14; see also Sachchidananda 1988: 80). K. Mann makes similar observations on the Bhils where the freedom of a Bhil woman in the sphere of premarital sex, marriage, divorce, access to decision-making bodies, etc. is being gradually curtailed with Sanskritisation. The Bhil woman is already adversely affected in terms of her freedom to select a male and to elope and marry. Among them, the purdah system has also been adopted from caste Hindu society (Mann 1987: 155). Of course, Roy Burman treats much of the divorce and separation in rural/tribal India as desertion, emphasising the powerlessness of women. In this sense he views Sanskritisation as a positive influence as it limits the possibilities of divorce. Interestingly, he tends to link age at marriage more with the customary practice of bride price than with Sanskritisation or distance from it. Citing the case of the Hos of Chota Nagpur, he points out that it is not uncommon among them for a girl to wait till her mid-30s before she can find someone who can pay the bride price and become her partner in life (Roy Burman 1988: 14).

With improvement in economic condition or even Sanskritisation, it has been argued that tribal women workers tend to withdraw from outdoor work in agriculture and allied activities. There are observations available in the existing literature on the inverse relation between Sanskritisation/rise in social status and withdrawal from manual labour to support such an argument (Roy Burman 1988: 16). These observations however are succinct, casual and lack analytical rigour. To begin with, Sanskritisation is not the only basis of rise in status. Education and white-collar employment are equally important. There is no doubt that with Sanskritisation there has been a tendency among tribes to withdraw women from manual labour—but this cannot be said for the entire Sanskritised population. Such a tendency is confined rather to a certain context and stratum. If one takes the case of tribes such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas and Hos of eastern India, one finds that the

withdrawal of female labour occurs among those who live in a multi-caste village or its vicinity and where they form a small minority. More often than not they are a migrant population. Further, the trend is present more among well-to-do cultivators than the poor and marginal ones, and is evident among white-collar employees when they find themselves in a particular situation where they constitute a minority population both demographically and ethnically. In other contexts, the withdrawal of women from manual labour has been the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, the Sanskritisation/Hinduisation process has been at work among most major tribal groups of eastern India for centuries. The Bhagat movements among most of these groups since the turn of the last century had been an important aid in this process.[4] And yet, Bhagat families in general have shown no withdrawal of women from work in agriculture and other allied activities. On the contrary what one finds is also high participation of women in agricultural activities among the non-tribal population living side by side with the tribal population in the region. Thus, a process of tribalisation has also been at work. This is not only true of tribes in Jharkhand but also seems to be the case elsewhere. At least, that is what a careful reading of ethnographic material suggests. To illustrate, a study of the Bhils by Mann shows that as high as 99.09 per cent of women participate in agricultural activities and 93.64 per cent in livestock rearing—even though the population studied had been considerably Sanskritised (Mann 1987: 89–90). In other cases, rise in status—such as change in familial male occupation to white-collar employment—has not necessarily led to the withdrawal of women from manual labour. Indeed where such individuals are also tied to land and agriculture, women in the family continue to perform their gender-specific routine agricultural work activities. Where male members of the family have to live away from the villages due to their jobs, women have the added responsibility of organising the agricultural work normally performed by men.

Whereas acculturation like Sanskritisation and Hinduisation led to change of a certain kind among tribal women, the conversion to Christianity resulted in different changes. For instance, it opened up the space for tribal women to participate in religious worship side by side with men, a practice that was denied them in the earlier religious traditions of many tribal societies. In a number of Protestant denominations, they have been appointed deaconesses,

preachers and trustees. They have also been organised into women's groups within churches to carry out social, religious and welfare activities in the society. Christianity has also made modern education accessible to women in tribal societies (Kelhou 1998: 59–60; Zehol 1998c: 26–27). At the same time, it has introduced a variety of restrictions in the name of ethics and laws of the church, which go against the kind of freedom that tribal women enjoy in their traditional social set-up. It also set in motion a process of segregation between boys and girls and put a stop to divorce that had been easy to work out according to customary tribal law. Most importantly, gender inequality inherent in the Christian churches and denominations continued. Both Hinduisation and Christianisation thus led to a number of restrictions on the kinds of freedom that tribal women traditionally enjoyed. For Hinduisation, such restrictions were a part of the concern for respectability/status; in Christianity, it was more to do with religious morals and values. An inherent inadequacy of these perspectives is that they fail to capture the variety of changes witnessed within tribal societies.

Assumptions Underlying Tribal Studies

Underlying the accounts on tribes in general, with particular reference to women, is a basic assumption that these groups are primitive, savage and backward. This is driven home, time and again, through accounts of their modes of making a living, technology, food habits, lifestyle and more importantly, through representations of their bodies. Tribes were invariably represented as half-clad, with only leaves and grass fibres and, at times, naked. This is seen in vivid pictorial forms in anthropological and other works to make the point of their primitive existence. Some ethnographers like Elwin and Furer-Haimendorf even celebrated such virtues among tribes. For example, in the case of the Baigas, Elwin went to the extent of providing detailed narratives of the place of sex in tribal life, the sexual life of children, ideas of erotic attractiveness, wooing, romance, and frequency of intercourse (Elwin 1986: 230–70). That these are governed by certain codes and ethics has been overlooked or under-stressed. Such views dominated colonial ethnography and have of course undergone a change, and are no longer entertained in anthropological writings today. However many people, including officials working among them (especially

at the lower level) continue to have such ideas. Of course, exceptions are not ruled out.

The values governing the larger the Indian society are, however, in the process of change. Indeed, there has been a paradigm shift with regard to the nature and types of values sought and at work in the post-Independence era. The ethos as embodied in the Constitution and in law is one of freedom, equality and social justice and the latter has also been part of the rhetoric of the times. With this, there has been a shift in the image one had of women in tribal society, especially among the educated and enlightened. In recent years, there has been more analytical discussion on the status of women in tribal society. Earlier, they were portrayed as having a better status than women in caste societies, with physical mobility, choice in marriage, divorce and remarriage, access to property and resources. Such assumptions were based on an examination of the literature available in monographs with reference to rules of inheritance, right to property, share in the decision-making process, etc. In short, these hinge on the one hand on rights and privileges these women enjoy and on the other, on the kind of role assigned to them by virtue of belonging to a particular gender. Consequently, tribal women were invariably depicted as having higher social status than their counterparts in caste society. However, the economic burden and workload of tribal women as well as their access to education, food and nutrition, modern occupation and political participation, especially in the modern context, has not been given the kind of attention it deserves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the proceedings of the series of seminars on the status of women that the North-East Regional Centre of the ICSSR held in different parts of the region between May 1988 and February 1989.[5] The discussions here were of a more critical nature (see Chauhan 1990; Mann 1996; Mehrotra 1992, 2004; Zehol 1998c).

Stages of Social Formations

One of the dominant ways of looking at change in tribal society is to show change in the mode of making a living; this is most glaringly reflected in the change from food gathering to food producing or from swidden (slash and burn cultivation) to settled agriculture. Such transformation is also evident in a shift from communal and

collective ownership of land and use of labour to private ownership. Developments such as these have led to a critical examination of the idea of tribal society as an egalitarian one. Forms of inequality in tribal society in its traditional setting have been analysed. Of these, gender inequality has been highlighted as the most pervasive, irrespective of the stage of social formation. A dimension that has been highlighted in this context has been the relative position of women and men under different types of social formations such as food gathering and hunting, swidden agriculture, settled agriculture and state formation (Menon 1993; Nathan 1997). The position of men and women in different tribal groups has also been studied without treating social formation as the reference point. Such analyses have been done with respect to division of labour, forms of property, religious institutions, family and state. Through examination of the former, an attempt has been made to show how establishment of patriarchy took shape in these societies. In social formations such as food gathering and swidden agriculture, rigid division of labour was either absent or gender inequality in one sphere was offset by equality in another. For example, citing the case of the Birhors in Jharkhand, Nathan (1997) shows how the greater importance of men due to their involvement in the public domain—in this case distribution of meat (prestige food)—is neutralised by a similar kind of engagement in women's market exchange and transaction activities. Similarly, among the Khasis, the higher social status of women due to rights of ownership held by them over ancestral property is neutralised by men's hold over the decision-making process.

It is however not clear if this inequality that Nathan explicates is more to do with shifting cultivation or the institution of matriliny and settled habitation of the population as is the case with the Khasis. Again, he traces the monopolisation of hierarchy by men primarily to the formation of the state and the establishment of individual property. Men's control over the ritual and public/political sphere is seen to be a crucial factor in the struggle to exclude women from ownership of land. Yet the case of the Khasis with state-like institutions or the Jaintias with full-fledged state institutions do not seem to corroborate such an argument (Sen 1985).[6] Women continue to hold ownership over land and the monopolisation of hierarchy by men is as yet absent among them.

Some scholars have traced witch-hunting to the pattern of land-ownership in tribal societies. Kelkar and Nathan (1993: 109–18), for example, argue that it is the life interest of a widow in the entire land of her husband that is a major fetter on the property rights of the husband's male agnates. Following this, they argue that victims of witch-hunting are in particular widows who have such a life interest in their husband's land. Such an interest restricts the property rights of male agnates of the deceased husband, who have to wait till after the death of the woman to use the land for accumulation or for consumption. A widow without children is therefore more vulnerable to attack on the pretext of being a witch (ibid. 263). While there may be an association between the two in some cases, it is difficult to generalise that witch-hunting has primarily to do with ownership of land. Anyone who has studied witchcraft is familiar with the fact that it is much more complex than a practice associated only with property rights. In fact, a number of witch-hunting cases have been reported from time to time from the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal, where access to property was hardly of consequence (Gupta 1979).

The myth of gender equality or higher status of women in tribal societies has also been critically viewed through an examination of customary law in respect of property, marriage, inheritance and so on. It has been shown that women in tribal societies are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men in their respective societies (Nongbri 1998). It is interesting to note that the very practices that are regarded as indicative of higher social status in one kind of setting turn out to be in-built depressors in other settings. This is brought out by Tiplut Nongbri in her discussion of bride price. Referring to several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, she points out how women among them are treated as mere commodities to be easily procured by men through bride price. A custom that was originally intended to compensate the girl's family for the loss of an economically active member, bride price has thus become a convenient justification for men to abuse their wives and treat them as disposable commodities. She writes, 'The system of bride price has proved to be the bane for women and lies at the root of proliferation of polygamous unions as wealthy men can take on a number of wives simply by paying an agreed sum to the girl's family' (Nongbri 1998: 33–34). In her study of Taivar Girasia, a tribal group of Rajasthan, Unnithan-Kumar points out how bride price is viewed not so much as a recognition of a woman's contribution to the household or as

a payment for the loss of a productive member, but as a compensation to the father of the bride and his agnatic group for the past expenditure on her maintenance, particularly consumption and food. Drawing on this, Unnithan-Kumar argues that bride price (valued in practical terms), is regarded as an important contribution that women make. The lack of ownership of property by women is legitimised by the Girasias on the ground that women move on marriage from their natal villages to their affinal villages (Unnithan-Kumar 1997: 205–6).

In this context, I would like to point out that it is an established fact that the division of labour in tribal society is based more on gender and age than on hierarchy and occupation. Division of labour has been both fluid and rigid. It is however not clear as to at what stage and on what principle the division of labour could be said to have assumed the form of inequality of rank or status between sexes in tribal societies. There is little discussion on how and on what basis the differences, especially between the sexes, came to be graded. For instance, whether divisions were mere division of work and labour and therefore devoid of evaluation and gradation, which is intrinsic to the consideration of being of high or low social status. Hence the study of the status of women does pose problems. It is difficult to study them from the perspective of the values inherent in those societies, especially since such values in those societies invariably project the idea of collectivity. Equality and sharing therefore turn out to be the overarching value in those societies. Hence, rather than talking of high or low social status, it is more pertinent to talk of inequality of gender. In the latter case, one can examine the relative position of women and men in relation to their access to equal opportunity, both formal and substantive.

Second, the taboo on women touching and using the plough in tribal societies has been seen as a way of denying women a control over the means of production viz. land (Kishwar 1987: 96; Nathan 1997). This lack of access and control over land is however already denied in these societies by existing customary laws. For instance, Oraon and Ho women, who are forbidden to hold the plough, are denied access to land by customary laws existing in their societies. The explanation of the denial of women's access to land in terms of taboo thus seems far from adequate. After all, even the Brahmins

are prohibited from ploughing. That does not mean denial of access to land. Even in swidden agriculture, which Esther Boserup describes as a women's farming system, the allocation of plots is made to men in their capacity as the heads of the household though women exercise greater control over the plots after these have been allocated. There is no custom of plough cultivation among the Mizos, Semas, Konyaks and so on and yet women do not have access to land in these communities where tribal land under swidden agriculture is controlled and distributed by the chiefs. Not only that but a rudimentary form of social differentiation seemed to have been at work under swidden agriculture too. It is a different matter that the social differentiation is generally associated with the state and private property formation. And yet such formation among the tribes, though at work well before the coming of the British, was confined to a few pockets or tribes. However, it is the incorporation of tribes into the larger social system under colonial rule and administration that accelerated as well as opened up new vistas of social differentiation among them. The nature of development pursued by the Indian state in the post-Independence era has only accelerated and intensified the process at work during the colonial period.

Social Differentiation and Developmental Policy

There is evidence of increasing social differentiation in tribal society rooted in factors such as the introduction of private property in land, growth of trade and the market, immigration of non-tribes in search of land and employment, spread of modern education, opening up of new occupations as well as state-sponsored programmes. As a consequence, tribals have lost land and been compelled to take employment as labourers in nearby quarries, coal-fields and the emerging towns as unskilled/semi-skilled workers (Banerjee 1981; Vidyarthi 1970) or move permanently/temporarily elsewhere for work and employment such as the plantations that were opened up in Bengal and Assam. A small number have been able to take advantage of market forces and benefits extended by the state for tribes, leading to differentiation among and within tribes, on criteria such as education, occupation, income, wealth, assets, etc. Categories such as rich, middle and poor (besides the landless) have come into being, giving rise to a

type of class relations that was absent within traditional tribal societies (Bose 1984; Pathy 1984; Shah 1982).

However, while there has been a lack of a gender perspective in studies on the differentiation within tribal societies over the years, there are a few exceptions. For example, S.P. Punalekar in his study of tribes like the Dhodia, Chodhra, Gamit and others in Gujarat points to a division between the well-to-do and the lower strata. This difference is also reflected in the social situation of the women of the two categories where women from the well-off section have come to enjoy certain advantages. Daughters are enrolled in local schools and later, there is a distinct tendency to educate them at schools away from the native village. Taking advantage of the facilities provided under reservation, many young women join professional courses such as teaching and nursing and some even pursue technical courses. Migration to the cities provides opportunities to acquaint themselves with urban ways of living and thinking. Soon, food habits and dress patterns reflect the influence of city life. There is a tendency among these girls to emulate the norms and practices of women of dominant caste groups on the one hand, and, on the other, to deliberately de-emphasise their own traditional customs, rituals and social practices. There is also a feeling of increasing disregard and even indifference towards women of a lower stratum of their tribe or village.

In contrast, school enrolment is low and the dropout rate high among tribes from a lower stratum who barely go beyond the primary level. They work as construction labourers, domestic servants, cartpullers, scrap collectors and vendors, and in this struggle for survival, the contribution of women is manifold. Daughters are often forced to discontinue school and go out to earn and supplement the income of the family. In towns, they develop a heightened sense of insecurity and a sense of dependence. In fact, their fathers, husbands or brothers take decisions regarding their work and wages. Such decisions are often challenged by women if they are taken without consulting them and result in lower wage rates (Punalekar 1988: 94–102). Sachchidananda demonstrates how educated Hos in white-collar employment, in recent years, aspire for homebound wives as a mark of higher social status. This has ultimately lowered the status of women (Sachchidananda 1988: 84).

Discussion on bride price also gives us a glimpse of the kind of changes that seem to be emerging especially among the richer sections of tribal society. In some tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, there is evidence of the rich among them using the traditional practice of bride price for their own sexual aggrandisement (Mann 1988; Nongbri 1998). A shift from bride price to dowry has also been manifest among the educated and salaried members of some tribes (Kishwar 1987: 151; Misra 1984: 107). Withdrawal of women from activities outside the household has also been reported from tribes in Orissa (Menon 1992: 106). Social differentiation is one kind of transformation brought about predominantly by state policies and programmes. The other kind of transformation is the increasing erosion of the existing, relatively egalitarian arrangement between men and women in tribal society. State policies and programmes in respect of tribes are broadly of two kinds—protective and developmental. The 'protective' includes constitutional and legislative rights that safeguard the interest of the tribes. Developmental measures include programmes and activities that are initiated for promoting the welfare of tribal people. It is to this aspect of the state agenda that scholars have paid the greatest attention.

The fruits of the measures taken under the constitutional provisions, however, have been far from even. The unevenness is marked across tribes as well as within tribes especially along gender lines. This is reflected in their representation in education, government and semi-government employment, institutions of governance, etc. The female literacy rate among tribes in the 1991 Census was 18.2 per cent as against 29.6 for men. Further, whereas the enrolment ratio for girls has been lower than that for boys, their dropout rate has been higher. According to the All India Educational Survey (1986), the enrolment ratio for girls stood at 67.96 as against 111.05 for boys at the primary level. The corresponding figure for dropouts was 78.73 for girls as against 71.57 for boys (Ambasht 1993: 61). In respect of health, most studies tend to suggest poor nutritional status and greater incidence of anaemia among women than men (Basu 1993: 30–31; Menon 1992: 102). Such disparity is visible in white-collar employment as well as in politics at the local, state and national levels (Government of India 2000). Men and women have thus been differentially affected in respect of avenues and

opportunities opened up by the state under constitutional provisions. On the whole women have remained handicapped in almost all these new sectors of social, economic and political life.

Even in the spheres where they enjoyed some autonomy, control or comfort, state policies and programmes have now deprived them of that. They are constrained to work under more depressing conditions. Fernandes and Menon show how the depletion of natural resources has impacted women. They are not only exposed to greater hardships and difficulties with this depletion (land, forest, water) at the level of both the household and the community, but also to greater danger due to the nature of work and livelihood. Now women often have to walk long distances to collect wood for fuel and water for household needs. They cannot easily find fodder for cattle and, in certain cases, cannot even meet the daily requirement of food for the family. Coping strategies have led to large-scale migration of tribal men and women to urban areas in search of employment (Fernandes and Menon 1987; Menon 1993: 35).

Nongbri has tried to locate these concerns within a concrete situation of state action such as the Supreme Court ban on timber logging and its implications on tribal women of the Northeast region. She points out how this ban has resulted in an increase in women's already overburdened work responsibilities. They have to work more to meet the economic needs of the family and domestic chores have increased manifold. She also points out how it threatens women's traditional rights to land and forest, and also enforces their marginalisation from management of their natural productive resources (Nongbri 2001: 1898–99). Migration in search of employment is the most obvious coping mechanism—the growing urban areas being a major destination.

Conclusion: Emerging Discourse

The People of India project launched on 2 October 1985 under the auspices of the Anthropological Survey of India enumerated 461 tribal communities of which 174 have been identified as subgroups.[7] Tribal communities in India are enormously diverse and heterogeneous. There are wide-ranging differences among them with regard to language, physical characteristics, demographic traits, modes of livelihood and cultural exposure, as also treatment and position of women. Their roles, rights, privileges as well as

constraints differ. Women continue to be governed by customary laws and norms. The data available on gender in tribal societies is sketchy, especially in the context of transformations that have been taking place. Given such heterogeneity, it is rather difficult to generalise on the position of women as a whole across tribal groups in India. What has been observed can at best be described as being illustrative and heuristic.

Despite such heterogeneity, they seem to share one point in common, that they are different from the dominant community of the region. Such persons have always been seen as alien and as outsiders and nowhere is this more pronounced than in situations of intense intercommunity competition and conflict. In Northeast India, such conflict not only resulted in the creation of tribal states but also an exodus of the non-tribal population from the sub-region. Yet such conflict still prevails, especially in states or regions where non-tribes continue to form a significant part of the population (Bhattacharjee 1982; Kumar 1995), as in the new state of Jharkhand. The outsiders here have invariably been described as exploiters and oppressors and are addressed by terms such as the *diku*. Even in Meghalaya, where the exploitation is less, a very strong term, *dakhar*, is used for the outsiders.[8] There has been a steady erosion of the tribal life support system, of lands and the forest, leading to an increasing pauperisation of the majority. There is also a loss of language, and a real danger of tribes becoming minorities in their own land. Given all these factors, the construction of identity and community has taken on interesting dimensions. On the one hand there has been the movement against the influx of outsiders for fear of becoming a minority in their own state or region. On the other, there has been a demand for the establishment of an autonomous council in either the region or the state with a view to protect the social, cultural and economic interests of tribal people. Such articulations are more marked in the eastern and northeastern regions than the other regions of tribal India.

In all these arguments, traditions and customary law—and therefore even the gender issue—play a pivotal role. This has led to an interesting discussion on gender issues among the intelligentsia of many tribal groups. Questions raised have far-reaching consequences for the freedom of women on the one hand and the issue of equality on the other, particularly with regard to property rights

on land. A lively discussion that has been going on in Jharkhand revolves around three points. One concerns tribal tradition or, to be more precise, customary tribal law. According to this law, land in many tribal communities is held by the lineage and not by individuals. Individual families have the right of use but cannot transfer it by sale or other means outside the lineage. This being the custom, the articulation of the demand for a share in ownership of land by women is considered misplaced and against the tribal ethos. The other two relate to transfer of tribal land from tribes to non-tribes and use of the provision of reservation by children born of inter-tribe marriage.[9]

An important feature of change is a large-scale alienation of tribal land from tribes to non-tribes. Several studies point to the massive land dispossession that began with British rule. This process has become accentuated in post-Independence India despite enactment of the Land Transfer Regulation in states with a large tribal population. As of January 1999, the area alienated stood at over 900,000 acres. The states where this was most widespread were Andhra Pradesh, undivided Madhya Pradesh, Bihar (specifically Jharkhand), Gujarat and Orissa. The methods by which tribal land has passed from tribes to non-tribes, are mainly through fraud, force, enticement, encroachment and indebtedness (Government of India 2001: 119).

One of the ways by which non-tribals are acquiring tribal land is by marrying tribal women. In view of the fact that there is a restriction on the alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes, such methods have become fairly pronounced in areas like Jharkhand. In fact, K.S. Singh refers to the large incidence of alienation of tribal land through marriage with tribal women among the Hos of Singhbhum (Singh 1988: 3). Tribal women who marry outside the community are not only seen as aligning with the dikus but also as conduits of land transfer from tribes to non-tribes. Often after such transactions, non-tribal men have deserted tribal women. This in itself is an emotive issue among tribes in view of the long struggle that they have waged against the alienation of tribal land. Coupled with this is the wider issue of tribal demography. Tribes in their own territory/locality are increasingly losing ground numerically with far-reaching economic and political implications. In the process, their survival as a group/community seems to be at stake. Hence anything that tends to jeopardise their land and population

is viewed with a great deal of indignation, a case in point being reactions to women marrying outsiders, especially dikus. At such times there is conflict and tension between tribes and non-tribes as the former mobilise against such marriage alliances. At times even coercion and intimidation have been used against young women who are being courted by men of non-tribal origin. Somewhat related is the issue of reservation. There has been a general tendency among families of mixed (inter-tribe) marriages to take advantage of reservation extended to the tribes. This raises the issue of whether children born of a tribal mother and non-tribal father are to be considered tribal or non-tribal. This issue has two dimensions, the legal and the socio-cultural. According to tribal customary law, lineage is invariably derived from the father's side, which makes the children's tribal status problematic. Even if they take their mother's totemic title and seek advantage of the legal provisions for tribes, they are still contravening customary law. And yet one finds children born of such wedlock taking full advantage of the reservation facilities, thereby depriving genuine tribals. As this phenomenon is fairly widespread in Jharkhand, it explains part of the resentment against non-tribals marrying tribals.

An equally interesting discourse in tribal society is over the issue of women's property rights, particularly inheritance. One section is in favour of property rights in land for women, despite resistance to the same in the name of custom and tradition. In the case of Jharkhand, for example, it is argued that, as per tribal tradition, there is no individual ownership of land. Rather, the tradition there is that of the *khuntkatti* system, where land is invariably held by the entire lineage. Hence the question of extending ownership rights in land to women does not arise. However, it may be of interest to note K.S. Singh's observation on the matter. A higher sex ratio among the Ho tribe accounts for a large number of single women, many of whom claimed their customary right to maintenance. This was often questioned by their male agnates. Singh, as the Commissioner of Chota Nagpur, disposed of a large number of cases regarding Ho women's right to maintenance according to custom (ibid.: 3). Among the matrilineal Khasis, the ethnic identity issue is raised along with articulation of changes in the system of kinship, namely kinship roles and rules of inheritance (Nongbri 1998, 2000). Resistance to women's property rights is also related to the economics of land size. It is argued that women's entitlement

will lead to further subdivision and fragmentation of already subdivided and fragmented land. In Jharkhand that will adversely affect farm efficiency and viability.

Issues such as these pose the problem of a woman as an individual and citizen on the one hand and as a member of a community on the other. As an individual and as a citizen, a woman is entitled to human rights provisions as well as of citizenship, that guarantee individual right to freedom. Yet there are provisions in the Indian Constitution that aim to protect and safeguard the interests of the tribes as a community. Taking a position either way can only be done at the risk of being accused of ignoring or overlooking the gender dimension of these issues. This is sure to be more problematic for non-tribal scholars or activists than for the tribals and the solution has to be provided by the community itself.

Notes

1. Notable among works with a focus on tribes are Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), Russel and Hiralal's *Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces of India* (1916) and Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1906).
2. K.S. Singh made this observation.
3. Sanskritisation is a term coined by well-known sociologist M.N. Srinivas. The term is used to describe a process whereby a caste lower down the hierarchy emulates the lifestyle of the dominant caste or the caste just above it. By doing so, it attempts to move up the ladder of caste hierarchy. The term Sanskritisation has also been extended to understand the process of social change taking place in tribal society. In my view, the extension of the term is inadequate in the tribal context. After all, higher social status or social mobility is not the overriding concern among tribes. Further, even with Sanskritisation they have invariably been assigned a low social position. This being the case it seems more appropriate to speak of Hinduisation than Sanskritisation.
4. The core of the Bhagat movement is abandonment and exorcism of minor spirits. It demands adoption of the Hindu rules of ritual purity such as vegetarianism, ritual bath, sacred thread, etc.
5. Eleven regional seminars sponsored by the ICSSR-NERC were held in different parts of Northeast India between May 1998 and February 1989. As many as 136 presentations were made in these seminars. Reports of the Directors of the regional seminars were discussed at length at the Social Scientists' Meet in Gauhati University between 23 and 25 February 1989. The purpose of this meet was to distil the information and points of view of the vast number of papers and discussants.

6. The full-fledged state had developed among the Jaintias well before the coming of the British. No such development had taken place among the Khasis. However they did have a kind of political system, which was not exactly a state but something closer to it. It was a kind of chiefdom. For a good account of state formation in tribal societies, see Sinha (1987).
7. Several volumes have been published under the auspices of the project. The publications have been classed into national and state series.
8. The terms, used in a pejorative sense, have a strong evocative and emotive tone. They are widely employed by the tribes of the respective regions as a rallying point of social and political mobilisation, especially if tribal interest is at stake.
9. The benefits of reservation are provided for members of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities in the domain of politics, government employment and institutions of higher learning in proportion to the size of their respective populations. Accordingly 7.5 per cent of jobs/seats have been earmarked for the tribes at the national level. The corresponding figure for the Scheduled Castes is 15 per cent.

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