

21. European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies

26.07.2010 - 29.07.2010

University of Bonn, Germany

Panel 19: Indigenisation of Modernity in Indian Tribal Societies

Convener: Dr. Peter Berger, University of Groningen

Abstract: This panel investigates indigenous perspectives on modernity in tribal societies of India. Considerable differences can be discerned in the circumstances of tribal communities in relation to various aspects of modernity such as development agencies, tourism, political parties, as well as state institutions of education, police, administration and medical care, to name just a few. Two interrelated questions will be crucial. Firstly, what is 'modernity' from the local perspective, how is the notion constructed and is there a concept approaching our idea of modernity at all? According to Sahlins, indigenous cultures have their own visions of modernity. In a selective, active and creative process of indigenisation, aspects of modernity are integrated into particular cultural logics, which articulate specific values and goals. Thus, secondly, we want to examine how such features are incorporated and transfigured in relation to indigenous systems of ideas and values as they are articulated in ritual, economy, architecture or any other form of cultural expression. A relevant related question is how specific actors operate within this field.

The convenors invite contributions that are based on ethnographic fieldwork and approach the questions outlined above. In order to get a fresh and critical perspective on the material discussed the papers are discussed by two scholars working on similar questions but in regions other than India.

Discussants: Prof. Dr. Guido Sprenger (University of Münster), Dr. Sabine Luning (Leiden University)

Contact: Dr. Peter Berger: p.berger@rug.nl

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen

Sequence of Contributions:

Note: the presentations will be 20 minutes, followed by ten minutes discussion

| Day | Time | Name (break) | contribution |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Monday ,26 th of July | 14:00- 14:15 | <i>time buffer</i> | <i>time buffer</i> |
| | 14:15- 14:30 | Peter Berger | INTRODUCTION |
| | 14.30- 15.00 | Cécile Guillaume-Pey | INTEGRATING MODERN MEDICAL CARE IN A SAORA VILLAGE |
| | 15.00- 15:30 | Piers Vitebsky | BAPTIST AND HINDU CONVERSION AMONG THE SORA OF SOUTH ORISSA |
| | 15:30- 16:00 | <i>break</i> | |
| | 16:00- 16:30 | Abhilash Thadathil | CLAIMING LAND; (RE)CLAIMING IDENTITY : ĀDIVĀSI GŌTRA MAHĀ SABHA AND THE INDIGENOUS MODERNITY IN HIGHLAND KĒRAḶA |
| | 16:30- 17:00 | Georg Pfeffer | WELFARE WORK FOR KUTTIA KOND |
| | 17:00- 17:30 | Raphael Rousseleau | MANY MEANINGS OF 'DEVELOPMENT' AROUND THE NIAMGIRI HILLS (ORISSA) |
| | | | |
| Tuesday, 27 th of July | 14:00- 14:30 | Alice Tilche | WHO IS IN THE FRAME? SHIFTING MODERNITY AND MARGINALITY ON DISPLAY |
| | 14:30- 15:00 | Radhika Borde | THE SARNA MOVEMENT |
| | 15:00- 15:30 | Marine Carrin | THE SANTAL AS AN INTELLECTUAL |
| | 15:30- 16:00 | <i>break</i> | |
| | 16:00- 16:30 | Markus Schleiter | LOVE DANCES AND HOLY GROVES: THE ARTICULATION OF INDIGENEITY THROUGH SANTALI ROMANTIC VIDEO FILMS |
| | 16:30- 17:00 | Peter Berger | CONTEMPORARY TRADITION. THE NOTION OF NIAM AND RECENT CHANGES IN HIGHLAND ORISSA |
| | 17:00- 17:30 | Sabine Luning Guido Sprenger | DISCUSSION OF PAPERS |

Abstracts of Contributions

1. Cécile Guillaume-Pey (Paris)

INTEGRATING MODERN MEDICAL CARE IN A SAORA VILLAGE

Modern science and biomedicine « are nowadays an integral part of the history of indian national identity » (G. Zupanov et C. Guenzi, 2008). Nevertheless, the introduction of modern medical care has varied from one population to another. The object of this paper is to understand the reception, integration and occasional rejection of allopathic medicine in a tribal population among which its introduction is fairly recent. The Soara are for the most part concentrated in small villages located far from the major urban centers of northern Andhra Pradesh and southern Orissa, in remote hillsides and forests. In this tribal society, as in other parts in India, the border between the medical and the religious is porous. Many diseases are considered to be the outcome of witchcraft or the influence of spirits. In this context, how is modern medical care, called 'yoi' - a term which refers to non-saora people - medicine considered? I will point out the different strategies used by local actors to appropriate a care system understood as foreign. We shall see how two apparently incompatible systems can be combined or, on the contrary, be considered mutually exclusive. While some individuals resort to both doctor and ritual specialist for the same illness, others, especially among the younger educated generation, consider the etiologies offered by both systems as irreconcilable, the appeal of modern medicine going hand in hand with definite disdain for traditional ways of curing.

2. Dr. Piers Vitebsky (Cambridge)

Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

BAPTIST AND HINDU CONVERSION AMONG THE SORA OF SOUTH ORISSA

This paper discusses drastic changes among the Sora of Orissa since I first lived with them in 1975. In *Dialogues with the dead* (1993), I analysed a distinctively 'tribal' shamanic cosmology, morality and personhood which in this non-literate society were characterised by open-ended negotiation between the living and the dead, who spoke through female shamans. However, this cosmology has now ceased to satisfy younger Sora. As they enter the literate world of school and the national space of party politics, they are becoming either Baptist Christians or fundamentalist Hindus. Between them, these mutually hostile paths to 'modernity' squeeze out the shamanist worldview of their elders.

I shall explore the shift from fluid and irreverent oral dialogues with ancestors to the authoritative written texts and (male) monologic forms of prayer and sermon, in which young Sora study the sacred geography of ancient Israel or of Hindu nationalism while ignoring the surrounding landscape which contains the souls of their own deceased parents and grandparents. I shall discuss some unusual attempts to perceive analogies between the Bible and shamanism, or to interpret Hanuman as an ancient Sora, and ask whether the Sora are indigenising these two identities or using them to indianise themselves.

3. Abhilash Thadathil (JNU, Delhi)

CLAIMING LAND; (RE)CLAIMING IDENTITY : ĀDIVĀSI GŌTRA MAHĀ SABHA AND THE INDIGENOUS MODERNITY IN HIGHLAND KĒRAḶA

This paper discusses the role Ādivāsi Gōtra Mahā Sabha (AGMS) (founded in 2001), as a home-grown tribal movement in (re)claiming the identity and land-rights of the Ādivāsis in the forest-clad highlands of contemporary Kēraḷa. Here, the carpet term 'Ādivāsi', denotes different/heterogeneous groups of tribal communities including settled agriculturalists, servile labourers and hunting-gathers who have been living on the fringes of the subcontinental socio-political hierarchy. The traditional territorial rights enjoyed by the 'Ādivāsi' communities of Kēraḷa have been severely encroached by the outsiders during state-sponsored migration/plantation drives — which once was hailed as the epitomes of Modernity — since the days of the colonial Modernization in down-South, resulting in an abrupt expulsion and alienation of 'Ādivāsis' from their native environment. The crystallization of the land-rights movement under AGMS, as this paper argues, puts forth a fundamental critique, not only of the known equations of the national modernization under a post-colonial context, but also challenges the received/derived wisdoms of modernity in South Asia. This paper will further focus on the organisational form and ideological contents of AGMS and make an attempt to argue, in contrast to the highly generalised explanations, that land-rights movement of AGMS represented a process of collective identity articulation/assertion along with a systematised effort for democratic bargain. Agitation at Mutaṅga in Wynad wild-life sanctuary — Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve — had symbolic as well as material implications. In the first place, it was an overt assertion of Ādivāsi indigeneity through their reconstituted/redefined traditional institutions like Ūrukūṭṭam. At the same time, it was a physical enactment of their autonomy as citizens under a liberal democratic set-up. By invoking memories/memorials of a collective past, and welding them with a concrete social action, AGMS had laid out crucial knots — though ephemeral — of an indigenous modernity.

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4. Prof. Dr. G. Pfeffer (Berlin)

Department of Anthropology, Free University of Berlin (emeritus)

WELFARE WORK FOR KUTTIA KOND

One of several Kond tribes in western Orissa has been declared a “Primitive Tribal Group” by the state government in the 1970s in order to accelerate welfare work within a ‘backward’ community. My paper compares this impact with Niggemeyer’s earlier descriptions (1964) by reference to conditions during my fieldwork in 1980 as well as revisits during 1990 and 2000. The results show the gradual disappearance of certain central features of the Kond culture (like the youth dormitory), the government’s inconsistency regarding the major religious ritual, the buffalo sacrifice, and generally a massive inflow of lowland Hindus who take advantage of recent ‘welfare’ in the form of road constructions and the liberalisation of transport facilities to open up businesses and control tribal land. The communal outburst of excessive violence against local Christians in 2008/9 must be understood within these general modernization efforts.

5. Dr. Raphael Rousseleau (Paris)

presently Lecturer in anthropology of religions at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

MANY MEANINGS OF ‘DEVELOPMENT’ AROUND THE NIAMGIRI HILLS (ORISSA)

The project of Beauxite mine in the Niamgiri hills, inhabited by a Scheduled tribe community : the Dongria Kond, attracted national as well as international debates in the last few years (in particular by F. Padel). The aim of this paper is not to repeat this widely publicised debate, but to analyse the discourses and perceptions of four different agents in the arena : the mine’s promoters and the urban Kond’s partisans on the one hand, the Kond and their neighbours on the other hand.

I would focus in particular on the various and contradictory ways the word ‘development’ is used in this sensitive context, but also and in relation to it : the terms ‘nature’, ‘mountain’...

Above all, I will point the reformulations which occur between the Kond perceptions and practices and their urban partisans. For example, the Konds are clearly against a project which would put an end to their very way of life, but not necessarily against ‘change’ at large, as it is implicitly presumed in the public presentation of them as « natural tribes ». Therefore, one key issue is how they see the past and present ‘change’ ?

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6. Alice Tilche (London)

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies
WHO IS IN THE FRAME? SHIFTING MODERNITY AND MARGINALITY ON DISPLAY

Historically, Adivasis found their place in museums within the paradigm of colonial or anthropological otherness – as primitives awaiting civilization, or as the ‘exotic’ – repositories of dreams and nostalgia. What does it mean for Adivasis to move towards the centre, to become new curators rather than objects of museumisation? What are the effects of such shifts, both in terms of museum praxis as well as wider questions of marginalisation?

This paper focuses on the work of *Vaacha: The Adivasi Museum of Voice*. In a context of social and economic marginality, the construction of the tribal “other” as a negative identity in need of “Hinduisation” within mounting projects of nationalism, the Museum aims to generate Adivasi knowledge as a resource to negotiate power. Located in a village of Eastern Gujarat, with Adivasis as its curators, it also involves transnational networks of artists, researchers and institutions, from regional festivals to a National Consortium of Tribal Art and an International Conference of Indigenous people.

While at first an alien idea, the Museum worked to encourage new modes of reflexivity – as the familiar was made strange, through explanation and display, new questions emerged about the meaning of objects, cultural practices and wider processes of social transformation. New media, cultural forms, trans-national connections had a bearing on how the local could be expressed, while being themselves open to re-contextualisation - the museum developed with a focus on knowledge transmission and performance rather than the modern ‘temple of objects’.

This paper will situate the museum in today’s global paradox, the homogenization of technology, desires, cultural forms on the one hand and the proliferation of difference on the other. By focusing on museum processes - of research, display, reflexivity – it hopes to emphasise the interweaving of histories, memories, global, local and regional contexts, communities and the state, the modern and the traditional as they emerge through people’s active engagement in the world – with things, colors, form. Finally, by grounding the museum in a wider political arena, different and contested projects of modernity will also become clear.

7. Radhika Borde

The Little Tradition, research and consulting initiative, Jharkhand
THE SARNA MOVEMENT

This paper discusses a recent Adivasi eco-spiritual/political movement. In the early nineties, a series of cases of divine possession of Adivasi women began to be reported in the region of Jharkhand. These women claimed that they were possessed by Sarna Mata (the Adivasi Earth goddess) and were led in trance states to sacred groves. They started gathering in the groves for worship on Thursdays and also made efforts to regenerate them by the implementation of afforestation programs. From Jharkhand, the movement is reportedly spreading to Chattisgarh and Orissa as well

as parts of West Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. This spiritual movement has now become a larger bioregional movement and is also highly politicized. It promotes the traditional produce of the land, the natural eco-systems within which agricultural activity is situated and the cultural traditions that are linked to it. Devotees of Sarna Mata also hold regular meetings to discuss land use and the promotion of agricultural productivity. It has also given birth to a political party. Its politics are centred on revitalizing the essence of the Schedule Five of the Indian Constitution within which Adivasis of east-central India are given a special semi-autonomous status and are allowed to pursue their traditional relationship with the natural environment.

8. Dr. Marine Carrin (Toulouse)

Director of Research CNRS, LISST , Centre d'Anthropologie

THE SANTAL AS AN INTELLECTUAL.

The acknowledgement by the Constitution of India of indigenous languages and scripts has offered the possibility for *adivasi* assertion. These changes affect the discourse of the leaders who claim a history and culture for their own group. The construction of an alternative culture through narrative, village theatre and other cultural expressions, has become part of the subtle process of reinvention of tradition. It is also a way to assert their identity while stimulating academic and popular interest. I will explore in this paper how the adivasi intellectual engages himself in political action through cultural assertion, considering the space allowed to popular agency in the construction of identities by looking more closely at elite formation and the formation of youth culture among indigenous people. Yet if the adivasi intellectual seems to represent a new kind of agency , his ancestor is to be found in the Santal archives (kept in the Oslo University Library archives) which have allowed the Santals to reflect on their own history, questioning the colonial project, as shown by the reactions of present-day Santals. Do Santal intellectuals to-day reflect a knowledge which is still informed by the past and the memories of the Santal rebellion ? Can we also trace in their discourse other influences such as the voices of activists and political leaders? Some others have been prompted to interpret adivasi assertion as strategically essentialist, but I shall ask whether these strategies contest the idea of “intangible heritage”, which aims at preserving authentic markers of *adivasi* culture as “tribal”? I will then question to which extent Santal and adivasi intellectuals are able to develop strategies of empowerment and to frame new approaches to citizenship in India.

9. Dr. Markus Schleiter (Leiden)

International Institute for Asian Studies

LOVE DANCES AND HOLY GROVES: THE ARTICULATION OF INDIGENEITY THROUGH SANTALI ROMANTIC VIDEO FILMS

In Santali films, modern elements – such as Bollywood love dances, fashionable sunglasses and the female lead actress wearing varying designer jeans –play a

significant role, suggesting that these films are closely connected to western media flows. The Santal people themselves – the main speakers of the Austro-Asiatic language Santali – are an indigenous group of South Asia, and from 1850 until to the present, ethnographies on them have continuously depicted them as a group appropriating (colonial) modernity with ease. Based on my own audience ethnography with viewers of Santali video films in Mayurbhanj (Orissa) I, however, oppose the view that present-day articulations of a Santal modernity have evolved from this group's almost primordial affinity to embracing modernity. I furthermore argue that these articulations are primarily independent of western media flows. Much more than this, the way these films entwine modern elements into "traditional" elements, such as Santal's holy groves, derives from a distinct narrative form of hybrid identity claims in South Asian popular films. Based on these claims, articulations of Santal indigeneity as competitive and modern are mainly connected to Bollywood's glamorisations of these identity patterns – especially by focussing on a globally successful Indian with a strong "traditional" bond – which has spread into many regional settings in South Asia. The Santal's referring to modern elements in building their indigeneity is furthermore fostered by the fact that there are links between specific concepts of romantic love in Santal culture and Bollywood popular culture. For example, in these societies it is accepted when loving couples marry by elopement (*angir bapla*), and young people build a specific "traditional" joking relationship to their beloved called *sangart* (siblings of the spouses of one's siblings) which allows them to flirt and have pre-marital love affairs. Referring to modern romantic love, as enchantingly portrayed both in Bollywood media and Santali films, thus enables film viewers to articulate these concepts as part of their own Santal modernity.

10. Dr. Peter Berger (Groningen)

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen

CONTEMPORARY TRADITION. THE NOTION OF *NIAM* AND RECENT CHANGES IN HIGHLAND ORISSA

During my fieldwork among the Gadaba of highland Orissa the notion of *niam* ('tradition', 'custom', 'law') turned out to be at the same time a crucial and elusive concept. It is grounded in a system of ritual practice that pivots around the sharing and feeding of sacrificial food that also gives rise to certain types of social relationships associated with maintaining and re-making *niam*. More generally, *niam* is associated with valued and 'even' forms of relationships based on forms or reciprocity and opposed to forms of 'negative reciprocity' particularly associated with the *rau* demon.

In contrast to, for example, the Santal and the Kond the Gadaba have had little contact with the British colonial power and, moreover, they were not considered to be sufficiently 'primitive' by the Indian government to be the target of elaborate development schemes as are the Dongria Kond or the Bonda. However, the Gadaba surely did not live in splendid isolation as is the stereotype of tribal society. The last decade saw some more or less drastic changes. At the time the traditional dress of women nearly had disappeared Western tourists arrived on the scene, who want to see Gadaba women dance in exactly these dresses. Hindu teachers now force their

pupils to abandon their beef diet and scold their parents for their liquor consumption. Ganesh *puja* becomes an obligatory ritual for school children. New options in relation to Western medicine or *botika* have to be negotiated with traditional healing practices. The paper will deal with the question how *niam* relates to some of these aspects.

11. Discussion of Papers

Discussants: Prof. Dr. Guido Sprenger (University of Münster), Dr. Sabine Luning (Leiden University)