Some Patterns of Tribal Leadership

A Aiyappan

Before undertaking any action programme, the agent of change should have some idea not only of the theory but also of the general morphology of tribal leadership in its relatively static phase in the past and in the present fluid situation of rapid change under the powerful impact of modernism. A great deal is known of charismatic and religious leaders of tribal groups, but not of other types of leaders of the past and the present.

An attempt is made here to describe briefly a few typical situations and the history of group or individual leadership emerging in these situations in order to suggest the kind of problems which the researcher is likely to meet with in tribal societies.

THERE is a pressing need in India now for research information on problems of tribal leadership. Administrators of welfare programmes on a nation-wide scale are confronted with the task of locating genuine leadership and enlisting it in the service of tribal and rural reconstruction. The wide-spread failure to do this has been partly responsible for the malaise in our community development schemes. On-the-spot studies and active involvement in welfare work are necessary before the anthropologists can help the administrator in his difficult job. Anthropologists in India are getting sensitised to the new field of leadership studies as applied to our rural and tribal communities. (The Seminar on Leadership held in Ranchi in November 1962 discussed various aspects on the subject with particular reference to rural and tribal India. The report of the Seminar when published is bound to be of great interest.)

Before undertaking any action programme, the agent of change should have some idea not only of the theory of leadership but also the general morphology of tribal leadership in its relatively static phase in the past and in the present fluid situation of rapid change under the powerful impact of modernism. History would give us insights into the nature of leadership which different situations threw up, the relation between leaders and followers, the instrumentality of leadership, the personal and group goals sought to be achieved, and so forth. In the following pages, a few typical situations and the history of group or individual leadership emerging in those situations are briefly described—not a detailed analysis is given—in order to suggest the kind of problems which the researcher is likely to meet with in tribal societies of India. A great deal is known of charismatic and religious leaders of tribal groups, but not of other types of leaders of the past and present.

Leadership that Got Pushed Out

The Kisans are a Dravidian-speaking tribe living mainly in the Districts of Sundergarh and Sambalpur of Orissa, their largest concentration being in Gangpur, Bonai and Bamanda. The Kisan language is allied to the Oraon language and the tribe itself is believed to be an off-shoot of the Oraons. The Banna was the traditional leader of the Kisans. The word Baria, it is surmised, means "king". The Baria was a minor 'Raja', over-lord, above the village-heads (Gountia). The Raja of Gangpur recognised two Barias, and Raja of Bamanda recognised four who are still surviving and functioning to some extent. Copper-plate charters appointing them as chieftains over the Kisan were also granted. The Baria's functions were mostly social and involved very little administrative or revenue or judicial work. Fines and several fees collected by them were the chief source of income for the Barias. The Baria had the special function of arranging the marriages of widows and divorced women and the readmission of illicitly pregnant women into Kisan society. The bride prices of all these types of marriages went to the Baria. At the last phase of Baria-hood in the lowland villages, the widows and divorcees were almost sold away. This kind of 'revenue' collection led ultimately to the decline of the office of the Baria.

The office of the Baria got stabilised because it helped to weld several Kisan villages together and provided a machinery for social control at an inter-village level over areas which included about 100 or more villages. Disputes which could not be settled at the village level or by a small group of nearby villagers were referred to the Baria who could fine or excommunicate or readmit guilty persons. The position of the Baria was strengthened by the use the Rajas made of the office as their channel of communication and as their "executive". After the Rajas lost power and the British came in, the Rajas and Barias lost their roles. The new emerging tribal elite did not like many of the things done by the Baria, e.g. the admission of aberrant women into Kisan society. The "sale" or similar disposal of widows and divorced women was also repugnant to the emerging tribal elite. The support for the office from the popular side also gradually waned. People stopped going to the Baria to deal with the various categories of disputes described above. Inter-village disputes also ceased to be referred to the Baria.

About 25 years ago, the authority of a Baria to impose some rather cruel sanctions was questioned in a criminal complaint. There was a custom by which, in cases of seduction, the Baria allowed the brother of a seduced woman to kidnap the sister of the accused man (seducer). Educated Kisans thought this was unjust and exploitative and filed a complaint. My information in this case is, unfortunately, incomplete, but it shows that forces to undermine traditional authority were being generated by an emergent and new type of leadership.

By 1945, a new movement was taking shape. This was the organisation of the tribes on the model of the caste associations of the Gonds, Telis and other castes. Social reform was its aim and one of the first resolutions of the Kisan Jati Sabha was for the abolition of the Banna's office. The Panchu Palli (five villages)—a council of leaders—representative of a few villages came now into existence to settle matters involving more than one village. For this there was precedent in the council which could, in the past, be summoned by an aggrieved villager to settle a matter which a Baria refused to adjudicate. Several Barias and village leaders would attend such a council. But the Panchu palli referred to here had limited coverage over a few villages. Informal councils with the jurisdiction over four or five villages functioned in the past also. A resol
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tion of the Kisan Jati Sabha only formalised this small council's role.

The Ritual Leader

Another type of leader, exercising social control, is the Panigiri (Panigrahi) or Ghata Bariha. He helps in the maintenance of the existing structure at the inter-village level and also the ongoing sanskritisation process, to which some of the Bariha's activities ran counter (e.g. readmission of aberrant women). In a Barias' territory there may be two or three Ganga Ghats (ghats for purificatory baths) each in charge of a Panigiri. The Panigiri's influence is declining, but not so much as the Banna's. The Panigiri is the person who ritual readmits deviants by sprinkling water on them, formerly on the orders of the Bariha or local leader. The Panigiri hears disputes regarding readmission and cases which could not be decided at the village or inter-village level. With the emergence of the Panchu Palli and Kisan Jati Mahasabha the Panigirs influence is going down as cases now get settled quietly at the village level.

Persons capable of "talking", with good economic status based on land-ownership, with literary or puranic scholarship, with medical and other traditional knowledge, or with contacts with courts and the world outside, are the kind of men who get into the new leadership positions. Gram Panchayat members also are invited to sit with these leaders in tribal meetings. Government servants are only outwardly respected by the Kisans. Land and bullocks give real status, for the Kisan is business-minded, worldly wise, and calculating, and values real property. Active politicians of the Congress party (most of them formerly members of the Praja Mandal) and some of the Ganatantra Parishad party are found among the Kisans. Most of the new leaders are of the Congress party, but there are many among the people belonging to Ganatantra Parishad. The Jharkhand party has little appeal to the Kisans. These new leaders are genuinely interested in the future of the tribe and are all reformers. The all-India parties are attempting to draw these leaders into their own groups. Thus the Kisans are moving from the state into national parties.

Annan Pittan was an outstanding personality among the Kurichiyas of Wynad, one of the predominantly tribal areas of Malabar. The Kurichiyas are still one of the most conservative of South Indian tribes. Unlike the Nayars, they retain their matrilineal family system, and many other old world customs, little affected by modern trends. My acquaintance with the tribe began about 1934 and I have been in touch with them for the last 18 years. Annan Pitttan was one of the four or five literate men of the tribe who number about 12,000. Apart from literary he had several other qualifications, the capacity to "speak law" being one of them. His skill in handling disputes, skill as a hunter and marksman with both the shot gun and bow and arrows, his stature and bearing were among his additional qualifications. Some time about 1937 Annan Pitttan was nominated as a Panchayat member to represent the Depressed Classes, for at that time the Kurichiyas were wrongly included in the list of Depressed Classes. The elders of the tribe were opposed to his accepting the membership of the Panchayat, so the gods were consulted in the usual formal manner. The shamiati as the mouthpiece of gods told them that the gods were opposed to a member of the tribe accepting the membership of the Panchayat Board. Now the Kurichiyas are an extremely religious people with an exaggerated development of religious institutions which has been undoing the tribe as in the case of the Saoras of Orissa. Anan Pitttan disobeyed the commands of the gods and accepted the nomination and attended the first meeting of the Panchayat Board. Within a few days he had an attack of cholera and he died within a few hours after the attack. I had the sad privilege of attending his funeral ceremony. The tribal elders with whom I discussed the subject of his death told me that the gods had taken their revenge on the disobedient Kurichiya.

Responsive, but Ascribed Leadership

Few tribes there are in India who can equal the Kurichiyas in their religiousness. Yet occasionally we come across tribesmen who have courage to go against tradition. Annan Pitttan was one such, but his unfortunate death at a critical time gave the elders a good excuse to hold up social change. Had he survived, wider contacts of the Panchayats would have enabled him to attempt modernisation of his tribe.

Among the Koyas (of Malkangiri) one of the most backward tribes of Orissa (according to the list of the Dhebar Commission), the Pedda, the hereditary headman of the village, is in most cases the de facto as well as de jure leader of his village. He enjoyed this position in the past because the disposal of the village land was in his power and he was the agent of the Muttadars. But now he no longer enjoys this power and so his importance is much less, but he still controls social, political and religious activities, the Perma or priest acting under his direction. Some Peddas have now become Panchayat members.

The qualities which the Koya village wants in his leader are—

1. he should be fruck and fearless in dealing with outsiders, particularly Government officials;
2. he should be truthful;
3. he should be impartial; and,
4. he should be somewhat rich.

Prasanta Kumar Choudhury tells me that in each Koya village an annual meeting is held of all the villagers, at which they review the Pedda's work for the past year; the Pedda sits along with the other members of the assembly and listens but does not challenge any statement or express anger. The object of this annual meeting is to make him aware of his lapses and make him do better in the future.

The Koyas are a tribe of Dravidian speakers. Among several ancient Dravidian communities, the democratic, responsive leader of the type referred to here is mentioned in classical works in Tamil. The persistence of the institution among the Koyas is a matter of some interest.

The traditional pattern of tribal leadership which after stabilising its economic and political status sanskritises and leads itself up and partially out was well brought out in a dispute concerning an election from a double-member parliamentary constituency in which the tribal member got elected as the member for the general seat by getting more votes than his non-tribal rival. In the award of the election tribunal, the situation which I have referred to is discussed in detail. Candidate D in his nomination paper described himself as a member of a scheduled tribe, and the returning officer accepted his claim. The rival candidate who filed the election petition produced documentary evidence to show that in his school record and several registred documents he had described himself as a Kshatriya, that he had marriage relations only with zamindar families who also described themselves as Kshatriyas, that he was wearing the sacred thread and was maintaining a great deal of social distance between himself and the members of the tribe
to which he claimed to belong. The election tribunal held the view that D should be regarded as a non-tribal and on this and other grounds declared his election void.

I need not go here into the sequel of this dispute. There is no doubt that D's ancestors were tribals who managed to raise themselves to pseudo-Kshatriya rank through devices with which we are familiar. The procedure is about the same as in the Rajputisation described by Surjit Sinha in his presidential address to the section of Anthropology of the Indian Science Congress Session in 1962. D sanskritised himself and his leadership of the people after this was from outside. Under the traditional social systems, for both the tribal and the non-tribal ruralites, there were gains to be acquired by the assumption of Kshatriyahood. But, under the new constitution, the political gains were tempting enough for the provisional renunciation of Kshatriyahood. Under the traditional social system, the particular tribal society did not provide a satisfying role within it for a highly sanskritised elite. Under modern conditions, westernisation provides such roles without the individual having to create any myth for the status change.