

The History of Purum Debate : An Anthropological Analysis

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Prologue

Professor T. C. Das from Calcutta University, while working among the Purum of Manipur, was never aware of the fact that his monograph - "Purum : An old Kuki tribe of Manipur, 1945" would provide a ground for such an academic debate around the world.

Before we discuss the Purum in debate, it is pertinent to flash back to that academic discussion which finally brought in Purum to the central stage. In 1955, Homans and Schneider published a critique ("Marriage authority and final causes : a study of cross-cousin marriage) of Levi-Strauss's book, 'Les structures elementaires de la parente, 1949.' These books discuss the institution of marriage and the problem that if a society allows cross-cousin marriage, then it generally permits marriage between cross-cousins on one side and not other. Levi-Strauss gave a structural explanation while Homans and Schneider said that it was owing to sentiments. These explanations generated a long debate in which the Purum were used to illustrate the arguments.

The debate

In response to the critique on Levi-Strauss, Rodney Needham has published a monograph - "Structure and sentiment, 1962," in which the author tries to explain social institutions in terms of structure and Purum is used as an illustration. While analysing Homans and Schneider, Needham refutes their psychological explanation and says that,

"Homans and Schneider have misunderstood and misrepresented Levi-Strauss's views, and so far as their argument relates directly to these, it is wrong from beginning to end".

"They have preferred superficial statistical

correlations in place of intensive analysis, forgetting that you cannot compare what you do not first understand", and "This analysis is fundamentally not sociological at all but psychological, and inapt to the solution of sociological problem".

The basic argument on the Purum is that - Why there is matrilineal prescription of cross-cousin marriage ? ; and this they try to explain in terms of 'final cause theory' and "efficient cause theory". Needham defines a final cause theory as - "the purpose or end of the thing caused" ; and an efficient cause as - "the producing agent". Homans and Schneider define final cause theory (as Needham feels that they do as) as - "An institution is what it is because it is good for the society in the sense of creating organic solidarity, and some institutions are, from this point of view, better than others", and they assume that Levi-Strauss speaks about final cause theory while talking about matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. They further say that a final cause theory is not good enough, there should be an efficient cause theory and they at the same time, try to visualize one such in Levi-Strauss's views - "...members of some societies chose matrilineal cross-cousin marriage because they could 'see', in much the same way that Levi-Strauss himself can 'see', that it is better than other forms.....".

Needham on the other hand claims that Levi-Strauss does not anywhere in his book speak of these two theories in relation to unilineal cross-cousin marriage. Homans and Schneider, according to Needham, are simply trying to assert this in the line of Aristotelian paradigm that - "the house is there that men may live in it", but they forget that "... it is also there because the builders have laid one stone upon another".

Homans and Schneider's efficient cause theory employs psychological behaviour as one of the determinants in the selection of the type of marriage under question and this they explain in terms of a general theory that - "The form of unilateral cross-cousin marriage will be determined by the system of interpersonal relations precipitated by a social structure, especially by the locus of jural authority over ego".

They say that in a patrilineal complex the father exercises a jural authority ; and on the other hand, mother and her son relationship is a warm and nurturant which by its nature extended to the mother's sister and mother's brother. Therefore, the same rela-

tionship is exhibited between the ego and his mother's brother. Here, the mother's brother becomes a kind of 'male-mother' and the father's sister becomes a 'female father', in which the same 'respect and constraint' formula operated between the ego and his father's sister.

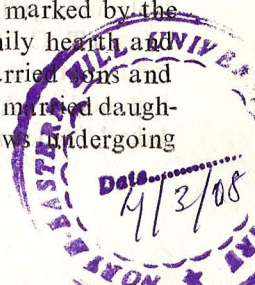
Thus the mother's brother has sentiments for his sister's son and by virtue of his closeness to his daughter, she too develops these sentiments for her cousin. This makes them say that mother's brother's daughter marriage is commonly found in patrilineal societies.

Needham negates this argument in the line of Evans-Pritchard's criticism (Evans-Pritchard, 1929) that the influence of the father should be taken into account in considering the formation of the sentiment towards mother's brother because the maternal uncle is not only the mother's brother's of ego, but also the wife's brother for ego's father, and in a primitive society the wife's brother is commonly a 'pivotal relative' and the attitude of the husband and the wife are more pronounced towards him than to other relatives. Therefore, some evidence of 'clash of sentiments' on the part of the parents will be found also in the attitude of Ego to his mother's brother.

Needham says that among the Purum 26 out of 54 marriages (T. C. Das, 1945) are with women other than actual MBD, and in that case the ego ".....to be fond of roughly a third of all the men of his father's generation in the total society seems a promiscuous lavishing of sentiments.....".

Needham in his own way using T. C. Das's (1945) data tries to explain this in terms of 'dyadic' relationship (Needham, 1958) based on marriage with 'Mother's Brother's daughter'. The fundamental 'dyadic' relationship is between the superior wife giving group and the inferior wife taking group and this 'dyadic' relationship is best exhibited (as Needham could see) in the Purum society through certain symbolic "Structural principles underlying both social relations of the sorts and other aspects of Purum culture....". (Needham R., "A Structural Analysis of Purum Society", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 60, 1958, p. 75).

This 'dyadic' relationship can be seen in their house pattern too. The right hand side compartment called the *Phumlil* marked by the presence of a sacred post called *Chatra* and the family hearth and is occupied by the head of the family and his unmarried sons and daughters. The left one called *Ningan*, shared by the married daughters (if when visits) and the prospective son-in-laws undergoing 'Yaun-Gimba' (service paid as bride-price).



There are many more such 'dyadic' structural categories but the most important of all which has generated enormous heat is Needham's assertion that the Purum kinship terminology 'conform with this type of marriage'. For example - "A man of wife giving group is addressed as 'Apu' (mother's brother; wife's brother; or wife's brother & son) and woman is addressed as kanaunu (mother's, brother's daughter or matrilineal cross-cousin". And - "a man of ego's group (wife taking group) is addressed as 'Upa' while a woman is addressed as 'Katunu". Thus *Katunu* are the "Prohibited women" and *Kanaunu* are the "potential wives".

C. Ackerman (1964,) refutes Needham and writes that kinship terminology does not determine the matrilineal prescription, when Needham distinguishes "Wife-giving group" from 'Wifetaking group' he says that to an ego all the men of the 'wife-giving group' are 'pu' - to him and a 'wife-taking member' cannot be called as 'pu.' But there is a wife taker who is also addressed as 'Pu' - the Father's Father's sister's husband. FFZH is as much 'wife-taker' as Father's Sister's Husband (FZH) or the Sister's Husband (ZH) or the Daughter's Husband (DH).

Ackerman also stresses that when 52% of the marriages are with women of the Mother's Brother's Sib and that 48% of the marriages are with women other than MB's sib (from T. C. Das, 1945), there cannot be any 'prescription'.

It is interesting to note that this statistical analysis of Purum by Ackerman has invited a series of criticism from William H. Geoghegan (1964); George L. Cowgill (1964); William Wilder (1964), and Ernst W. Muller (1964), who in general accuse Ackerman of using ill adapted hypothesis; demolishing Needham's major conclusions; distorting Needham's analysis of Purum society (1958, 1962) and of Purum material itself (Das, 1945).

Discussion

A careful perusal of this debate would indicate despite some over-statement understanding of this process by which people organise their lives is greatly enhanced. If we take T. C. Das's data as empirical and its delimitation in the process of employment (for analysis) and their statistical representation, apparently each analysis has a point. But often it is noticed that the scholars have chosen T. C. Das's data that they try to prove their own point, ignoring the data which would have challenged their assertion. For instance, C. Ackerman's assertion that both 'wife-giver' and 'wife-taker' cannot be addressed as 'pu'. By doing this Ackerman in the

first place agrees to the existence of dyadic relationship in the Purum society, secondly, he has picked this particular instance to negate Needham's assertion that "kinship terminologies conform with the type of marriage". But there are other terms which overlap both the groups, e.g. "Katerr" means both father's elder brother and his wife on one hand, and mother's elder sister and her husband on the other. The term 'Kanaunu' indicates both Younger sister (ZY) and Younger brother's wife (by W). Similarly 'Kapu' stands for all the mother's brothers (MB), Father's father (FF) and also Father's Father's Sister's husband (FFZH).

All these terms, from which Ackerman has picked up the term (Ka) 'Pu' for both FFZH and MB, in Purum society are either terms of honour or endearment. They are not the usual kinship terminology in the strict sense of the term. Thus, it is not justifiable on his part to assert that the Purum kinship terminologies do not conform with the type of marriage they practice. The Purum terms of relationship are intimately connected with social conditions and the prevailing type of marriage often influences the nature and character of these terms (Das, 1948).

Both Needham and Ackerman were wrong in analysing the data on MBD's marriage. Ackerman's assertion that from T. C. Das's original monograph, 52% of MBD marriage is not enough to justify "prescriptive" norm sounds dubious because Das himself in his book (p. 241) has said that the "Purum extensively practise cross-cousin marriage of one type, namely with the mother's brother's daughter", and "...thus, out of 85 unions recorded in 1936 in the three villages of the Purum, 63 (or 74.12%) happened to be brought about by union with mother's brother's daughters, in eleven (or 12.94 per cent) cases the bride was taken from the sib of the mother's brother."

Homans and Schneider's psychological explanation does hold some ground in Purum marriage type. We cannot totally dismiss the effect of emotion over marriage. The Purum society as it stands is a very compact society composed of five major exogamous sibs with fourteen sub-sibs. So with a total population of 303 (1936), distributed over four villages we can well feel how close a society can be. Under the given environment when it is customary to marry one's Mother's Brother's daughter and the practice of passing the night in the house of a man who has one or more grown up daughters may have the intention of providing an opportunity to the young people to cultivate premarital love which ultimately leads to happy union. Moreover, when every Purum village is

represented by almost all sibs, marriage alliances are mostly within the village. So, under such circumstances, to be fond of the mother's brother may not be "a very expansive affection" as observed by Needham (1962).

This assertion of Needham cannot be taken as it is. It should rather be examined in the light of Levi-Strauss's own statement, i.e. "The notions of prescriptive and preferential marriage are relative : a preferential system is prescriptive when envisaged at the model level ; a prescriptive system must be preferential when envisaged on the level of reality.

Remark

The Purum is an endogamous group and in any endogamous society marriage rule is always prescriptive. We have seen that a Purum marries his Mother's Brother's Daughter (MBD), i.e., he is prescribed to marry 'only' MBD. In the case of absence of a true Mother's Brother's Sib. This later statement suggests some relaxation of the prescriptive rule, but this laxity if we so call it 'preference' is again strictly limited within the prescriptive norm ; and nay deviation from this 'prescriptive-preference' (as I shall call it) is, still today, heavily punished.

Thus the marriage norm in the Purum society is Prescriptive within the endogamous group (here Purum itself is an endogamous tribe).

Notes & References

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