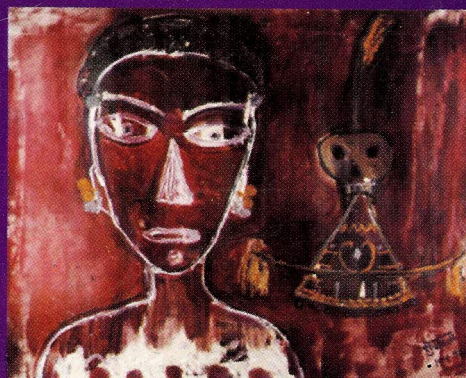


Rationality and Tribal Thought

sujata miri

A MITTAL PUBLICATION



The book consists primarily of papers presented at a Seminar on 'Rationality and Tribal Thought' organised by the Department of Philosophy of North-Eastern Hill University in the year 2001. The papers deal with issues ranging from the intricacies of the concept of rationality embedded in modern Western thought to detailed consideration of tribal currents of thought, action and life and the problem of understanding that they throw up. The book fills an important gap in our efforts to come to grips with the ideas of diversity, plurality and unity.

Rs. 395



SUJATA MIRI (b. 1942), is a Professor of Philosophy and at present she is the Dean of the School of Humanities and Education of North-Eastern Hill University. Throughout her long career as a teacher and researcher she has developed a deep interest in the understanding of cultures other than one's own, particularly tribal cultures.

Her interests range from philosophy to anthropology and history of the tribal people of the north-eastern region. Her published books include: *Suffering, Religion and Society: North-East India* (Ed); *The Khasi World View: A Conceptual Exploration*; *Liangmai Nagas: Legends and Stories*; *Communalism in Assam: A Civilisation Approach*.

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Edited by
SUJATA MIRI



THE EDITOR

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SUJATA MIRI

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1

INTRODUCTION

–SUJATA MIRI

The department of Philosophy was established in the year 1974 with the express aim of helping the students of the North Eastern region to achieve an authentic awareness of their own cultures and traditions. The majority of our students, we discovered, belonged to what are popularly referred to as tribal communities. The need to inquire into questions related to the understanding of tribal culture was felt from day one. I must confess here that at the outset we teachers had to overcome our own preconceptions and prejudices that had come to be associated with the word "tribal". The "tribal" has been generally classified as the one who is primitive and barbaric. Lacking a literate tradition, he is less developed with a way of looking at the world, which is naive and simplistic. A dialogue with colleagues in the sister departments led to the finding that they too, by and large shared with their counterparts in the rest of the country, an implicit faith in the Victorian understanding of the human condition as divided between the lowest, the savage, and the highest, which is what is understood as civilization.

The misplaced confidence in the western type of theoretical knowledge as the one and only type of knowledge, has left a very limited space to other systems of thought which could be termed rational. The ideal rational understanding is one that moves on the pattern set by the western civilization. This I feel is the primary factor which has led to the evaluation of tribal communities as backward,

as pagan and also as barbarous. The dominant conception of the elite, both tribal and non-tribal, allows only one cultural path, from the stage of the ancestors to the highest which resembles the glorious reality of modern western civilization. This appears strange when we ask the question what is new about modernity, for every age has its own modernity. However, in connection with the understanding of tribal thought specially we have been using the notion of modernity with reference to only the modern west.

We must note that in western modernity the notion of knowledge or epistemology occupies the central stage. It did not do so in ancient or medieval European thought. For modernity knowledge is unique, universal and leads to truth which is unique and universal. This knowledge itself is the seeking of truth through a kind of reasoning which is also universal and unique. All these ideas are brought together in the modern notion of rationality.

The kind of reasoning involved in this kind of search for knowledge or truth, is digital, calculative and binary. The paradigmatic use of such reasoning is made by machines. The demand is that all types of reasoning should be reducible to this type of reasoning if they are to have any value at all, value in the sense of leading you to the truth.

In this unitary vision, what is the place of man? Well, man is part of this unitary vision, man is part of nature, but there is something, which is special to man. Man is the seeker of truth; he is an epistemic being; he wants to know; he is curious. And the only way to know the truth is to follow the binary, digital and algebraic mode of reasoning. But man also has desires and there are many of them. How do you choose between them? For some, what desire you are going to choose is determined by the strength of the desire itself. For others, it is determined by the quality of the desire. But in reasoning, about what is qualitatively a better desire, there is nothing that can help you according to the modern unitary vision of knowledge. There is nothing that can tell you that one desire is qualitatively better than another. For instance, you can't really reason and decide whether playing football or doing philosophy is better. It is just your choice and that is what freedom consists in.

Western philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and in India, Mahatma Gandhi, have made extremely penetrating criticism of the modern conception of knowledge. It is not true that there is only one kind of reason or truth or knowledge they claim. There is a diversity of truth, knowledge and ways of arguing about things. For instance, Gandhi's notion of truth is extraordinarily creative. The idea of a tradition is central to his criticism of modernity.

A tradition embodies not just a way of life but a way of thinking, and therefore, a kind of rationality. A tradition might change, and as a matter of fact, change is written into the fabric of tradition itself. Therefore, its notion of rationality also might change, just as what it is seeking by means of that rationality might change. So every tradition has a kind of rationality which is embodied in it in a very loose sense. I say 'in a loose sense' because traditions have to be open, they must question themselves. Tradition embodies not just a way of thinking but a way of doing things, a way of conceiving, a way of conceiving what good life is. It embodies a vision. Each tradition consists of a different vision. And we have not just one vision of the world, or a single vision of the truth, of knowledge and of rationality, but there is a great variety of visions, of traditions which embody diverse ideas about good and bad, about the good life, about rationality, about truth and so on.

The serious acceptance of this fact led people in the west to embrace positions like relativism and perspectivism. Relativists say, if there are different visions of the world, of truth, of rationality, then you have your own vision of it and you are okay and I have my own and I am also okay. We cannot talk to each other. I respect you and you respect me. According to your criteria of truth, in accordance with your vision, you can't criticize me. In terms of my idea of truth and rationality which are embodied in my culture and way of thinking, I can't criticize you. So we can't talk with one another. This is relativism and it is false and it is very easy to prove logically that it is an incoherent notion. Similarly, perspectivism says that every vision is a perspective in terms of which we look at the world. There are different perspectives like the scientific perspective, the modern

perspective etc. The modern perspective is only one among many perspectives. I don't believe in either relativism or perspectivism and it is not philosophically very difficult exercise to show that such positions are sociologically rather than intellectually generated.

If you don't agree with relativism or perspectivism and still say that there are truly authentic and varied visions of the world, rationality, knowledge, truth and so on, then how do these visions come together? Or do they come together at all? I think, all of us know that it is a matter of fact that different cultures, which embody these visions, have come together. They have come together and conversed with one another and enriched one another by their coming together. Of course, there are occasions when people just say "well, we can't talk to each other any more". These are points of fundamental disagreements. On the other hand, human civilization, even in our little corner of India, the Northeast, has been engaged in transcultural conversation, though people speak different languages, each language embodying in its own way its own culture. These cultures have come together; they have talked to one another in a creative fashion; they have enriched one another in a great variety of ways.

There are a great variety of tribal visions. We must take these visions as authentic visions of the world, as containing within them their own ideas of what is good and bad, true and false, what ought to be done and what ought not to be done and so on. Each culture or tribe has ways of dealing with life embedded in that culture, and yet, it is not something, which is a step towards - the very first step indeed -, gaining true knowledge as modernity conceives it. Therefore, the tribal vision, if it is an autonomous authentic vision, it has to be taken seriously. The modern vision is one vision among others and there can be a conversation between the modern vision and the tribal vision and I hope this book will show us ways as to how this conversation can take place.

Although in recent philosophy particularly in the context of the debate about relativity of rationality and in the philosophy of religion some attention is paid to what they call primitive thought, there had been nothing like a serious attempt at a philosophical understanding relating to the

description and understanding of such thought. To remedy this and as a first step, we established contact with elders of the region R.S. Lyngdoh, H.O. Mowrie, Hipshon Roy, Father Sngi and Token Rymbai, amongst others who we felt could throw light on the tribal world views which answer questions such as: Who am I? Who are the others? What is my relationship to the other? A dialogue with the elders resulted in workshops, the findings of which were published and made available to the interested researchers in edited volumes titled *Religion and Society of North East India*, *The Khasi Mileau* and *the Khasi Worldview: A conceptual Exploration*.

At this juncture, we felt motivated enough to approach the U.G.C. for a grant under their special assistance programme which was sanctioned with Prof. Mrinal Miri as the chief investigator. Here I must mention the specific involvement of S.C. Daniel, Newmei Honibou and C.P. Alexander who contributed in every possible way throughout the duration of the project. Though we had to generate our own data and a considerable amount of field work had to be undertaken, our interest differed widely from that of the anthropologist, in that our ultimate goal was first, to articulate in as authentic a manner as is possible, the philosophical self-awareness of the tribes and second, to explore potentialities of rational debate within this awareness. Only finally were we to try and situate it in the context of the general philosophical debate.

Hopefully, the present Volume *Rationality and Tribal Thought* will not only contribute to the general philosophical debate on the concept of rationality, it will be doing the unusual task of examining the idea of the rational in the context of tribal thought. In our present historical situation, the truly responsible academic activity, specially in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, is one which will enable us to grasp, no matter in how many diverse ways, tribal thought with the resoluteness that such knowledge will generate the tribal's true hopes and aspirations. This book I am sure will make a contribution towards this knowledge. Those who have been seen as lying on the fringe of the Indian civilization are, may be, intellectually central to what we call the "Indian being." The papers by Archana Baruah, Ananta

Giri, L. Lenka and to some extent, Gautam Biswas, acquaint us with the philosophical debate connected with the concept of Rationality and related issues. Archana Baruah in her paper makes an attempt at understanding the nature of reason. The passion-reason-imagination tracheotomy which according to her is largely responsible for a narrow and inconsistent view of reason in terms of its limitations to transform our social practices and self-understanding, can be rectified by rethinking the nature of reason with respect to the role of the concepts of agency and freedom. She challenges the traditional conception of rationality and advocates a new vocabulary for a new understanding of rationality. Her reading of philosophers like Kant, Hume, Thomas Kuhn and Rorty, convinced her of the need and the possibility of working out the transforming power of reason conceptually, when this notion is linked to man's being or passion.

Jagat Pal's paper discusses the role of *tarka* (reason) in the realm of *shruti* or the oral tradition. He senses an inconsistency in Sankara's philosophy of *Sabda*. Sometimes Sankara says that transcendental knowledge can be gained only from revealed texts or *sruti*. At other times he says that if *sruti* goes against reason, it should be disregarded. In short, sometimes Sankara gives supremacy to *Sabda* and at other times to *tarka*. Jagat Pal argues that since for Sankara *sruti* itself is a superimposition, being an element of the *vyavaharika* world, it cannot have an inherent self-revealing value. Hence, *sruti vakyas* are to be placed under scrutiny of *tarka*. Consequently it is *tarka* or reasons that occupies the position of supremacy in Sankara's *advaita* philosophy.

L. Lenka in *Rationality and the Lottery Paradox* holds that there cannot be higher and lower grades of rationality, such as, say the scientific and the tribal rationalities. There is only one rationality. To argue this point, Lenka draws on the paradoxes of daily life which apparently look contradictory. People who stand by modern scientific rationality live with these paradoxes as much as the so-called primitive peoples. However, when logically worked out the apparent contradictions in these paradoxes disappear. In support Lenka draws on the Lottery Paradox. Accordingly, he concludes

that the apparent paradoxical beliefs of daily life are as rational as the primitive beliefs of the tribals. What we need is the notion of a rationality that is leveling, to justify the rationality that is involved in tribal thought. Contradictory propositions he points out are meaningless because they are just not false but always false. The lottery paradox and other paradoxes mentioned are not contradictory; rather, they are only paradoxical.

S.C. Daniel has undertaken to assess a particular tribal folklore in the light of contemporary understanding of what is understood as rational. His paper defines rationality in terms of the Kantian notion of universalizability. Daniel argues that there are certain universalizable moral principles inherent in every tribal folklore. These principles are fundamentally rational because they are universalizable. He draws on the Liangmei folklore by the name *A Tale of Two Orphans* for exemplifying this thesis.

Some Recent Reconsiderations of Rationality: Third Enlightenment, Tribal Life and Beyond by Ananta Giri explores the postmodern reconsiderations of the modern notion of rationality. Giri aims at opening rationality to cross-cultural translations and examinations, basing his thesis on the critique of Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam and Stephen Toulmin. The third-enlightenment these philosophers speak of, he points out, itself is bereft of the interrogation of the enlightenment division between the natural world and the world of transcendence. The paper discusses the need for transcending the seductive appeal of the proposal of third-enlightenment for a cross-culturally enriched understanding of the role of reason in human life, society and history, with particular reference to tribal life. Giri also points out that the need of the hour is not so much an epistemological transcendence but an ontological transcendence whereby the human vulnerability so powerfully expressed in the lives of the tribals can be brought out clearly.

The paper titled *Asiatic/Primitive Mode of Production: A New Exploration in Marx Beyond Marxism*, refers to Karl Marx's view of the stages of progress towards the industrial age. Though there is, Agarwal says, a natural dialectical process involved in the transition from the feudal mode of production

to the industrial era, there is no dialectics involved in the transition from the primitive or tribal mode to the ancient mode. Instead Marx advocated the use of force in this case. In the tribal mode there is action without expectation of a goal. With the coming of modernity, the speaker laments, that such action for just the joy of it, is being lost. However, we can retrieve this notion of action from the tribals who, in their festivities and dances just enjoy the repetition of it without any *telos* in mind. The writer exhorts a return to the celebration of life after the manner of the tribals. For linking the passage from the primitive mode of production to the ancient mode in Europe's civilization, Agarwal employs the biblical notion of the fall and the Greek notion of tragedy. He quotes from Aristotle's *Ethics* to clarify his thesis of the division of activity into teleological and non-teleological. The concept of non-teleological action is not altogether extrinsic to modernity but only the modern man is not aware of it, he concludes.

In *Reason, Normativity and Cultural Swaraj*, Gautam Biswas draws on the distinction made by Amartya Sen between the positional and the transpositional. It is possible, he feels, that both are valid and that there is continuous dialogue between the two. The central theme of the paper is that the idea of *swaraj* should become an ideal for every community and communities should recognize it. For that reason, the *swaraj* of the other is inherent in the *swaraj* of one's own community. Biswas also draws on K.C. Bhattacharya's distinction between universal rationality and obligational rationality. The former is abstract while the latter is necessarily located in a cultural framework. The two cannot be separated if we want to enrich intellectual life. He argues further that the concept of nation should not be conceived as a state of being, but of becoming. This amounts to saying that we are always in the process of building a nation. If it comes to the static position of power, then it becomes a symbol of domination. Biswas uses the notion of becoming in the Indian context because we have no one language, culture or religion and hence the concept of single nationalism in a static state of being is detrimental to our ethos.

In *World View about the Tribal Vs Tribal World View: Some*

Moral Issues, Asha Mukherjee argues that the inherent value thesis in favour of the preservation of tribal culture is essentially flawed. Individual is the seat of rights and there is no moral problem involved in culture preservation. However, cultures could be preserved if they are compatible with development, for aesthetic reasons and on the basis of universal principles like mutual trust. Asha also alludes to appropriate development with an understanding of the tribal from his own world view rather than from an external world view imposed on him, though she has not developed this position adequately. Her point of reference in these is the Santhal tribe and their world view and morality.

C.P. Alexander in his paper, *Ethos and Postulates of Nagas - A Philosophical Approach* attempts to conceptualize on the philosophical basis underlying some of the practices and beliefs of the general Naga tribal culture. Since there are many Naga tribes, Alexander adopts a holistic and existential approach to his study. He explores the Naga religious-moral ethos, their close kinship ties, practices like headhunting, their existential ambivalence, the three postulates on which their world view had been constructed, viz., here and now, perpetuation of ancestral-cultural-identity through genealogy, existence of the world of spirits where one would live after death, and the existence of a cosmic force (deity or spirit) which needs to be appeased for favorable outcome.

An answer to the question 'what can I know?' in relation to tribal thought entails a detailed philosophical description of the varieties of justifications that are available with tribal thought for the different kinds of knowledge claims that are made in it. It is rewarding to study the rites, rituals and practices of the tribal way of life. Such a study prepares us to undertake an analytical exploration of their customs with the sole aim of realizing their meaning.

Creation stories, religion, customs and practices, concept of right and wrong, ceremonies of life cycles and the matrilineal social setup of the Garo tribe of Meghalaya are analysed in reference to myths and poetry, ceremonies, customs and laws of the tribe in Caroline Marak's paper. Caroline tries to lay bare the rationale and meaning behind the analysed aspects of Garo life and beliefs. While asserting

that much of these practices are rationally and even empirically based, she feels that since the Garo culture is dynamic it is continuously evolving with the changes of the times by looking at itself critically.

The intricate rituals of the tribals as expounded in the paper on *The Mores of the Anals of Manipur*, shows Anals' awe at the mystery of life itself. Gokulchandra's paper dwells on the life and culture of the Anals of Manipur, which is a small tribe, the strength of which is only 14958 heads, i.e. about 0.65% of the total population of Manipur. Gokulchandra expounds the traditions of marriage, birth and death ceremonies of this tribe basing on his fieldwork among younger generation Anals.

Shailendra Marak's paper *Nature and Culture - A Garo Perspective*, discusses the concepts of nature and culture with special reference to the traditional Garo view on God-World-Human relationship in the background of an ecological rethinking. His focus in particular is on the ecological significance of the Garo vision. The first part of the paper describes the concerned people and their religio-cultural tradition. In the second part, he dwells upon the traditional Garo view on God-World-Human relationship. The third part is a critique of the consumerist culture in the contemporary life of the Garos. Finally, by way of conclusion, he proposes creating an eco-conscious culture among the tribals, in general, and among the Garos as a tribal community, in particular, in spite of the difficulty created especially in the light of the present day Christian influence that hammers on the idea of the sanctity of the other-world versus the profanity of this-world.

Any discussion centered on the rationality of tribal thought would involve an examination of the justifications available within tribal thought of the varieties of actual and possible actions in tribal society. The papers by Vanlal and Tesungla Ao attempt at what may be called an exploration of the phenomenology of morals within tribal communities.

Vanlal in *Tribal Value System and Leadership Issue* discusses the value system and leadership style of the traditional tribal society with specific reference to his own tribe, namely,

Hamar. Their traditional value system, he points out, was both cohesive and enabling. The speaker laments that in the name of development the old system is totally given up along with their rich cultural heritage. The old leaders were men of character and conviction. Vanlal advocates that it is high time we re-think the traditional value systems and leadership patterns, and wherever necessary, improve and develop, using contemporary scientific techniques. Nonetheless, little can be done to revive the many rich aspects of the old tradition of the tribals in the present context of a radically weak and malevolent social leadership and fragmented and torn social fabric in this age of modernity and transition. What can be done is to aim at development in keeping with the ethos of the tribals.

T. Ao in *Human Resource Management in Ao Society* dwells on the traditional systems of management and control in the Ao society. She draws on traditional Naga institutions such as the village council, the bachelor's dormitory etc. She laments that the forces that have disrupted traditional societies, especially in the North-East, are those which, in the guise of modernity and development, tend to upset the balance between the individual and the society or community to which one belongs. Very little attention is paid by planners and strategists to these traditional institutions in order to understand the tribal mind so that plans and projects ostensibly meant for them are accepted as such by them.

In a similar vein but more contemporary, keeping the gender issue as his focus Siby K. George writes on *Modern Education, Empowerment and Tribeswomen*. He emphatically claims that the educated and thus empowered tribal women of the Northeast tend to abandon the tribal way of life. In this context, his paper explores the possibilities of reconciling their traditional cultural values with the new ideals of education, development and empowerment. He concludes that women could be the central players of the reconciling of the new and old world views. If in the past they were guardians of the tribal heritage in the form of folklore, they could still be intellectual reformists of reconciliation.

In their descriptions of tribal world view Manjulika Ghosh and Sashinungla explore whether there is the

dominance within the tribal mind in one way or another, of a pivotal moral idea. Manulika Ghosh defines world view as a matrix, which channels and encompasses the totality of cultural experiences. It represents according to her a conceptualization of beliefs, experiences, norms and ideas into a systematic whole. On this basis Manjulika contends that despite certain variations, tribes world over, exhibit world views, which mingle their ideals about religion and magic, their beliefs in sorcery and spirits. The paper gives special attention to the community orientation of the tribals, which gives them stability and cohesion.

Sashinungla Ao, in *The Ao Worldview*, is more specific to one prominent tribe, namely the Aos of Nagaland. This paper examines the traditional Ao understanding of the close connection between man and his environment and makes use of it as a basis for the quest for a new meaning of existence. In the Ao world view, she points out, man, nature and God constitute the basic texture that makes us truly human. Sashinungla Ao makes good use of the Ao creation myth, which plays a central role in their world view, for a new dialogue in philosophy.

A very important contribution by C R Agera - *The Spoken and the Written: Tribal religions liberate the scriptures*, will further help the reader to understand a very crucial aspect connected with the understanding of Tribal religions. This paper tries to reinstate the status of the spoken word (orality of scripture) which has been lost under the onslaught of the written word in the post-Gutenberg era. And tribal religions, in particular, those of the non-literate tradition, are said to be 'undeveloped' or 'underdeveloped' religions on this account. Agera argues that orality, historically speaking, is not only a necessary precursor of, but also a source for, the written word. He concludes that the tribal cultures and religions may be effectively utilized in the service of recapturing the fundamental orality of the scripture. Agera succeeds in liberating the text of scripture from its overemphasis on the written aspect. It is not his intention to say orality is totally absent from the biblical tradition, but that it is given an unjustly backward place. The question is not whether we opt for orality versus the written, but to

acknowledge that the scripture is what it does to the religious consciousness of the individual and for this, orality has a special role to play.

People make a distinction between theoretical civilization and non-theoretical civilizations. The Greek civilization, for instance, is said to be the greatest of the theoretical civilizations. In a certain sense the Indian civilization is also said to be a theoretical one. It has given rise to theories, to theorizing as opposed to merely describing facts about the world. I don't believe in this distinction. I believe that every culture has embedded in it the possibility of theorizing and that theorizing does not consist in what Aristotle did or Plato did or Sankara did. Theorizing can be done in a great many varieties of ways. Philosophy in the west has been done in the form of dialogue, poetry, prayer, literature, etc. In tribal cultures and languages, philosophy has been done in all kinds of ways and practices like stories, songs, rituals, dance, that are living and dynamic. These are theoretical formulations, which are in a certain sense on a par with theoretical formulations of the Greeks or the great ancient Indians. The distinction between a theoretical culture and non-theoretical culture is something we should look at with a great deal of suspicion - that tribal cultures are not theoretical or that they don't understand what theory is, or that to understand what theory is we have to go to the West or to Sankara, is an erroneous notion.

In conclusion, let me restate that the aim of this exercise has been the hope that our reader will reach the conclusion that tribal epistemic and moral systems have a coherence whose adequacy and validity can be established, provided we are ready to share and appreciate the ultimate expectations of the tribesman. Their expectations do have the support of a metaphysical and spiritual imagination which on enquiry, at least, I have discovered. Of course for achieving an adequate philosophical description of such an imagination, I had to consider the various artistic manifestations of the tribes, their stories, their crafts, music and their songs.

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