

Social Networks through Religious and Cultural Practices and Human Behaviour*

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Role of social networks in influencing human behavior is widely recognized in the literature. Social network analysis forms the core of the understanding of the issues in the present day society. It has its root with the 'social structure' concept of the great anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown. Later, social anthropologists and sociologists turned their inclination towards the 'fabric' and 'web' of social life. By social networks we mean 'the 'interweaving' and 'interlocking' relations through which social actions are organized'¹.

Human behavior is influenced not only by the attributes, opinions and behavior of the individual agents but also through the contracts, ties and connections and the group attachments that relate one agent to another. That means how action of an agent is interweaved and/or interlocked with that of others in the social life. In most of the individual decision making exercises the role of social network has become prominent. Social network evolves through sociological ties and attachments, social connections, exercise of clout by the influential members of the community and the power of the agent to distract from the influences. The present paper seeks to analyse how the religious customs and cultural practices influence the social, economic and political decision making in a traditional society. The analysis focuses on the traditional religious acts in a traditional society and shows how it influences the social actions.

Dominance through religious and cultural practices

In a traditional society practice of a religious act or an established culture plays a major role to mould the behaviour of the people. Cultural practices by a section of tribal groups by virtue of their dominance in some way or the other (mostly on religious counts) very often characterize the vital aspect of living in the society. It manifests the establishment of a unique tradition which becomes a tribal culture in the society which they belong to, having pervasive influence upon the cultural tradition practiced by the society, gradually established and accepted

¹ Scot John 2013, page 1.

by all sections. This culture is established as a rule of law of the society evolved through a religious act through generations. They have their influences in social, economic and political life of the people. The adherence to the common cultural practices binds the different social groups under one social umbrella (network chain) wherein they commonly identify themselves as belonging to the common culture, the violation of or deviation from which is seriously viewed as grossly against the rule of the society and an unforgivable curse.

It also gives recognition to the influential group, which virtually serves as the pressure group in the society acting open or hidden in reshaping the social network and attitudes, and plays the lead role in the establishment of such tradition in the society making its adherence binding as a rule. Social and cultural imposition evolves through dominance. The dominance is on account of the relative superiority enjoyed by them in the society as an ancestral property for the reason that they are the aboriginal inhabitants and the people, since time immemorial, have been following the tribal rituals as practiced and imposed by them.

Social imposition culminates in determining the economic and political life of the society. They shape not only the social culture by making their religious traditions imposed in the society but also the economic and political life as well as the decision making in a traditional society. The head of the influential group can exercise his will by virtue of the respect and position earned by him in the society, with a social relevance, not economic or political. He influences/governs the mode and relations in both economic and social affairs through dominance.

In the tribal patches of Western Odisha, the tribal *Gond*² community dominates the rural culture by having their tribal ritual *Chhatar Yatra* widely acknowledged by the social communities as the religious act. The dominance influences the local perceptions of abiding or adhering to the principle as a part of religious act or belief which becomes the rule of the society, if at all they are to be the part of the wider social group. The influential lot keeps others in the stranglehold of religious beliefs, persistent through the cultural impositions, reinforcing their own ritual to exercise their dominance and clout upon the other social groups in the society. The *Chhatar Yatra and the Seasonal festivals* in the place of worship of village deity, called *Gudi*, are

²*Gond* community is believed to be the aboriginal community in some localities.

the clan-ritual turned socio-religious customs. These people believe the deity as the *tutelary*, means the protecting power, and impose upon others to adhere to it. The ritual translates in to social custom through religious act and dissemination of religious beliefs.

The ceremonial activities are completely at the behest of the head of the tribal community, who is designated as the *Jhankar*. He has his subordinates with different designations and a lot of hierarchical positions and powers. They have their own unwritten constitution to govern the religious affairs in the village which is an ancestral legacy. *Jhankar* is the village headman in connection with performing such religious acts in the village. The religious activities and the deities are their property rights as far as formulation of rules in this regard is concerned. By the way they enjoy supremacy in the village in the matter of the religious ceremonies relating to the tutelary. Even the occurrence of the epidemics is commonly believed to be the curse of the tutelary and this happens when the *tutelary* is not satisfied with the offerings of the people or when there is a deviation in the discharge of such religious ceremonies in the village.

In a traditional village set up the influence of such a group in the social, economic and political spheres of public life is obvious. *Jhankar* is invited in all social occasions including marriage. He is the religious doctor in curing dreadful diseases and ailments³. When the Spring comes and the lethal pox appears the *Jhankar* is invited to perform religious rituals, who makes an offer to the village tutelary on the behalf of the victim and people believe that it is because of the *Jhankar* and the tutelary the patient is cured. Several rituals are performed in the *Gudi* at different intervals in a year to pray for the well-being of the village also. In observing social festivals and celebrations the role of *Jhankar* as the influential member in decision making stands upheld. The economic and political behaviors of the people are grossly shaped by the clout of the influential head. The sanctions at the village level, with complete intervention of the influential group, to practice certain occupations by the community are there in a conservative society even in the modern days. In the political sphere also the influential group can influence the voting preferences of the people. While making decision regarding whom to vote in the elections, the

³ Sainath P, in “*Everybody Loves a Good Drought*” describes how the blind beliefs and superstitions in a traditional society cause adherence to the common culture. The local influential head acts as a religious doctor in curing the diseases and ailments also.

opinion of Jhankar is upheld by the village community. If someone opposes the decision he is believed to be against the Jhankar as well as the tutelary and as such he will suffer the curse of the tutelary. In the last Panchayat election, the son of Jibar Majhi, the *Jhankar* of Sinapali, contested as the Sarapanch candidate and one will be astonished to know how he won the election with a surprising victory. Nobody among the electors judged his credentials whether he fitted to be a candidate for the post and it was because of his credential as the Jhankar's son he emerged as the most-preferred candidate for the post. The manifesto emphasized that credential only and he drew the sympathy of the public. This sort of emotional hijacking through one's influence or clout is visible in the traditional societies constrained by peculiar social and cultural beliefs.

Conclusion

In a traditional society, in most decision-making exercises the issue of interlocking emerges and the clout element enters which becomes forceful because of the relative superiority enjoyed by some sections. Therefore, it becomes easy on the part of those influential elements to exercise emotional hijacking to influence human behavior in decision making. The social constraints like ignorance and superstition help strengthening the networks. Therefore the outcomes in the social actions seem biased. For an unbiased outcome in the decision-making, the network involving clout by the influential elements is utterly undesirable. More research is needed to study the influence of such networks on human behavior.

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