

Anthropology and Social Health

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ABSTRACT Sociological studies in the west have paid some attention towards understanding social evils which are rapidly growing in frequency as also in their manner of expression. In India the need of such studies were not felt till late. In the recent years, however, rapid urban growth, break of joint family and full exposure of the evils of the modern western society through cable has brought about a strong stress in the urban youth. The paper tries to examine the process in a very simple manner.

No country can afford to remain complacent about social health in the face of rapid cultural transformation. Yet we have seldom been able to address these issues in our public discussions. The enormous power of the media is also being largely taken up by issues which do not always concern the common man. Consequently public health, the dismal condition of ecology or for that matter the impending food and water shortage etc., are never given primary importance by the media. In the recent years we have observed an extraordinary rise of sub-adult suicides and/or their indulging in murder and violence in this country. The recent episode of mass hysteria about a monkey-man in Delhi is another form of counter-productive or aberrant behaviour in man which deserves far more attention of social scientists than what these phenomena usually get.

It is, therefore, of great importance that we try to understand the phenomenon of culture in our species before we can examine the various directions from which this ability in man can get distorted under varieties of contemporary urban pressures. Man seeks to adapt himself within a given environment by constructing artificial aids procured from the same environment. Animal fur used to cover oneself in arctic climate or creating dwelling structures in rain, sun and snow are but few common examples of this phenomenon. This can include numerous other aids in almost every area of human activity. Since this basically is a learnt behaviour, every new

member in successive generations has to be freshly taught the ways to survive. Nature has helped man in this very important requirement by first giving him a method of verbal communication and then by lengthening the period of a newborn's dependency on mother.

The ability to communicate verbally may have arisen out of a whole series of adaptive imperatives but for the growth of civilization in future its role was fundamental. One cannot imagine how Wordsworth, Shelley or Byron or even Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin would have been like without this ability. Probably they would all have lived and died in the same manner as any other organism. It is difficult to imagine that it was only about 40,000 generations back that we had just about began to experiment with this unique ability. Since language means merely an arbitrary array of sounds it can serve no specific functions unless each of these sounds are symbolically loaded with objects and thoughts. Further this association of a thought or object with a sound has to be identically followed by a group in order to become a successful means of communication. Consequently the semantic ambit of the term 'language' by necessity has to include a group having common symbols. In other words the easiest point of entry in the world of perception of a 'people' or an ethnic group is the language they use (Sapir, 1932). How a community names the 'things' in their environment and how these names are organized into larger groupings of thought serves as a potent indicator of the cognitive world of the people. The world, to any uninitiated, presents us with a chaos (of sounds, objects, thoughts and meanings). We make sense out of it by noticing some phenomena and ignoring others. Alternately we might group some things together and exclude others in one culture. While in another culture these groupings might occur in entirely different ways (Tyler, 1996). It is important to remember at this point that while discussing the seeking of universals

in symbolism (Mary Douglas, 1962) suggests that the most potent symbols are found in the realm of the mundane.

It will be easy to approach this world of cognition from the way socialization is done. In an urban area in India, a mother might say to her 3 years old on the first day it goes to school something like this:

"You must tell your aunty (essentially a pseudo kinship usage because the term teacher is still not included in the cognition of the child) when you want to go to bathroom. Eat your tiffin in time. Do not come out in the road, etc".

Let us call such communications as survival strategies. Surely this cannot be the same in every environment. That is, in a hill village a mother might say:

"Do not go to the edge of a gorge" while a mother in a desert area might have to say, "always keep to the shade". Consequently the urban child need not know the words "gorge" or "shade" while the hill or desert child need not know the words "bathroom" or "tiffin". The process can get ramified and a million lingoes can develop in every society in this manner.

The survival strategies communicated in the early phase of life tend to loose their bite as one grows up. This is because with growing up the child learns to ask questions. And one of the most awkward and difficult of these questions is *WHY*. Suppose a child says, 'She is my aunt'. The mother corrects and says, 'No, he is your uncle'. The child throws the 'dangerous' word, - *why*-at once. Obviously, the mother has to substantiate her point by drawing the child's attention to certain functional or role models. Like, for instance, 'aunts are always in the kitchen making goodies for you, wearing sarees and ornaments while uncles wear trousers or always sits with news paper or goes to office. This insignificant word 'why', therefore, compels one to tie up each sound of the language not only with objects or persons but to a whole range of expected role and functions of persons within a society. Conversely speaking, such communication also imply that uncles do not wear sarees or aunts do not go to office. The situation can become more complex when the child grows up further and start asking such questions as, why

aunty does not have moustaches and uncle does not have breasts'. The mother at this stage gives up and resorts to a simple answer, 'because the good lord planned it so'.

The elemental situation cited above shows how all verbal communications at some stage has to bring in god to aid explanation. This can also explain why early writings, like for instance, the Runic scriptures were widely accepted as magical charms in Scandinavia, in the same way as mantras in Sanskrit are taken in a Hindu society. That most of the earliest English literature are non-secular or written by clergymen, also can be taken as a possible influence of the holy domain in which the art of speech remained for a long time.

In a village society an ideological format evolves to define the normative pattern of behaviour both with in and without and this gets incorporated in the symbolic load of the language. This array of role symbols need to be articulated to the community and ritual as well as oral renderations or stories are created for this purpose. In a broad sense narrative provides a means of organizing experience and endowing it with a meaning and a common recognizable character. Narayan (1992) goes a step further - "starting at one point and emerging at another, a story mirrors the dimensions of time in human life... the world created by a story is often similar to lived cultural reality, it is also full of boundless possibilities. With in a story received categories can be combined into fantastic new shapes, and time can jump backwards, sideways, or far ahead. Men can be born to virgins, gods can fly through the heavens, objects can change shapes and animals can speak. By stretching conceptions of the possible, narrative transcends the here and now." (page 243)

Once these rituals start becoming weak, the ideological structure that decides, creates and recreate normative behaviour every generation starts losing its hold in the system. To prevent this important super-structure every culture or ethnic groups device their own type of stories to be ritually communicated on suitable occasions as a *katha* or *Pravachan*. It is a universal phenomenon and hence story telling exists wherever human societies exists. If at all one can find this phenomenon absent in any society it

will be the urban population in the mega cities. Infact the population habitually resident in such cities create their own guiding principles of a kind which need not follow the age old imperatives and hence can create a special kind of society which can be best designated as Industrial society. Here the ideology governing the life of an individual is colliding all the time with diverse strains. While one's individual ethnic strain brings in the Ramayana for social justice, Bollywood creates a David Dhawan pattern of soical justice and finally through the sky arrives the 'Papa don't preach' dictum!

Proceeding from our earlier discussion of an elemental situation we can see that if the good lord could create an aunty he certainly can also have the power to create food and water. If something abnormal happens to either the environment (i.e. food and water) or in one's own body this has to be attributed to another power which will be malign. The benign power in every tribal society is propitiated while the malign power is handled in the manner of appeasement and sacrifices. Thus, the spirit world containing the power of both doing good and bad is taken to be extremely potent having control over food, water, rain, disease and generally every aspect of human welfare. Multiple spirits float around to constantly monitor one's actions and interpersonal behaviour. The ancestors can also get annexed with the spirit world and may also require periodic appeasement. In course of time this can give rise to a complex spread of spirits having even a designated order, such as *Griha Devata*, *Kul Devata*, *Ishta Devata* and *Gram Devata* in some part of India. Gradually the role of social control is taken over by the 'good lord'. Binary oppositions can be created to demonstrate how severe are the sufferings of the transgressor. Eventually the story or Katha communicates this to the group.

A story constructed for this purpose has to have two polar characters of which one is positive and the other is negative. One has to progress from an average neutral position towards the positive pole. A large number of hurdles in the form of hinderences are erected by the negative spirit in this path. The actor has to cross these hurdles with the power of those values which need to be communicated to the members of the

society. To some societies these may be valour, righteous anger and war, while in another society these may be patience, love and forgiveness. The moment of resolution comes after these hurdles are overcome and one is allowed the powers that give him the ability to dispell the negative force. The narrative, whether in prose or verse, is keyed to the events for which they are ascribed with power. The experience of the narrator is transmitted to the listeners, thus enclosing them in a circle. The preamble of once upon a time, or long long ago to the rendition enables the plot to enter the realm of timelessness. In other words, the circle mentioned above frees itself of bondage of any specific time or person. The rendition is usually earthy in language and has the power to articulate oneself within a shared ideology. Although Tijan bai renders no folk themes (Ramayana is usually counted as a classical tradition, although it has several variants in the folk level as well), one can understand how put in a rural context she is capable of creating an ever existing ideological mosaic. The context in which such a rendition becomes meaningful is also very important. Tijan bai under arc lights in air-conditioned auditorium may be just an art form but she becomes larger than life and eternal when she acts in the dusk time in a remote village with possibly only one petromax within a village crowd. Anthropologically, therefore, Tijan bai becomes several times more socially relevant than Balmiki or his creation - The Ramayana. The importance of context can also be exemplified by a popular song of Pankaj Udhas - *Vatan se Chithi aai hai*. It may act as only a musical entertainment when played in a marriage party, but to a non-resident Indian away from home it is capable of creating murmurs in the deepest corners of one's being.

The complex industrial societies work under imperatives which need not pay attention to the cardinal functions of enculturation for which nature had created the delayed weaning time for our speceis. By three years age or even less in some cases we hand over our children to an impersonal institution. Here learning how to read a clock becomes more important than learning about rain and cloud. Slowly we turn out a generation who are minimally aware of rhythms of nature or about the precepts of handling one's

life. Consequently what used to be often repeated to growing children as 'morals' with the help of story telling start becoming meaningless. Narayan (1922), who had studied the practice of story telling in India, agrees that all storytelling in India need not be religious. She also points out that the same story can be used for pleasant diversion as also for potent religious teaching. Here she has shown how a set of morals itself can be propagated as non-secular basis of action for 'good life'. She further goes on to say, that, "the value of folk narrative in religious teaching is that oral transmission unselfconsciously accommodates change even as it plays upon cultural themes familiar to listeners from other contexts. The act of performance also brings these themes alive: listeners hear ancient message coming from a living source, flashed out with gestures and shaped around the immediacy of a particular situation" (p: 245). As a consequence of the absence of this kind of tradition in urban culture a child grows up without any frame for morals. For them self becomes most important and the child orders the world according to his self requirements. The problem of growing up in this form is that one has nothing to fall back upon during stress. That patience and perseverance are key to one's success and that one cannot keep these values alive if he orders the world in a self seeking manner is never ingrained in an urban complex system. As against this situation let us examine a story most commonly used in rural up bringing.

A white cloud, one day fought with a black cloud about their respective supremacy. The white cloud said, I would like to fall in a sea shell and become a pearl and I further wish that as a pearl I would be able to adorn in the necklace of the king. The black cloud said, I would like to fall in the fields of any farmer who is poor so that he will have a good harvest and his poverty will be removed. The good lord allowed both of their desires to be fulfilled. The white cloud did land up in the king's necklace and the black cloud could also allow a poor widow to fill up her granary. One day the king lost his way while hunting and came upon the same widow's hut and asked for food and shelter. The old lady gave the king food and the king

was so pleased that he gave the pearl necklace to her for saving his life.

These and many more such stories used to be told by the grand mothers with all the effects poured in the rendition. The child finds it easy to internalise such morals as the above story might imply. (Aspiring for riches is hollow and kindness towards anybody in distress enormously rewarding). A strong family and generally peaceful environment with leisure are the very important pre-requisites for the useful transfer of these and similar other values.

In urban societies many of these pre-requisites are usually absent. Parents have neither time nor patience to deal with millions of 'Whys' that a child puts up. Commercial imperatives bring in adult sex, nudity and crime to the bed room through television channels. Tired parents might switch on the television just for the sake of diversion but the 3 year old absorbs every thing like a blotting paper to satisfy all the 'Whys' he has in his mind. He learns to be trendy in tune with the world of hyper-consumerism and loses all his innocence. Suddenly we discover a generation next door who at the age of 12 years murders his grandmother, or at the age of 18 years starts stealing cars, or 'hits the street' in the mid nights. In the world of performance they start declining and a state comes when they either blame the world for their failure or enter into depression.

In the mega cities of India this kind of counter productive symptoms are already being noticed. Murder and suicide among the youth is also showing an alarming rise. Welfare agencies plan to handle this by opening number of help lines or numerous counselling centres. We have shown that such attempts can have merely a cosmetic effect. The actual nature of the malaise is far more deep rooted. Further if allowed to continue in the way urban societies are progressing, this malaise in our youth is capable of doing untold harm to the society.

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