Moral Society, Political Society and Civil Society in Post-colonial India: A view from Orissan locality

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1. Introduction

In today’s world, the “nation-state” and “civil society” have been placed in a privileged position of unquestioned legitimacy. However, we are well aware empirically that in many non-Western countries, there is a large space which cannot be engulfed by these two conceptions. In India, many political and social activities in public are carried out not by “nationals” or “citizens”, but by the logic of “community”, “faction” or “kinship”. These activities — be they community ritual, factional politics or nepotism — have hitherto been understood as a manifestation of the residues of non-modernized “tradition” which would be gradually washed away from the public sphere in the course of historical development of modernization. However, it is increasing becoming obvious to researchers that these phenomena are connected to the modern post-
colonial development and must be seen in their contemporary contexts. This paper attempts to depict and understand these activities according to their own historical, political and cultural logic. I employ the concept of “moral society” along with “political society” and “civil society” in order to look at the plural spheres of discourse and practice co-existing in post-colonial Indian society, each of which has different role and values.

Partha Chatterjee ingeniously takes up the concept of “political society” in order to capture the space of political activities that mediate between the “population” and the state in post-colonial democracies [Chatterjee 2000]. The lower strata of Indian society lack the associational channels for individuals to interact with the state, though this is supposed to be the norm in civil society. Although there had been attempts to create a civil society by the urban elites in colonial India [e.g. Isaka 2001], it did not take root in the larger segment of society. Civil society in the sense of “those institutions of modern associational life” has been limited in its sphere of actual workings till today [Chatterjee 2000: 44]. Instead, the people of the lower strata use survival strategies in which “the imaginative power of a traditional structure of the community, . . . , has been wedded to the modern emancipatory rhetoric of autonomy and equal rights” [Chatterjee 1998: 282]. Political society is built around frameworks that have relevance in modern political settings, such as political parties, movements and non-party political formations. However, the logic of group formation is not that of civic association, but that of community and (fictional) kinship which take on a modern institutional and discursive garb.

Chatterjee’s concept of political society captures the actual field of mediation between the people and the state in which groups, factions and communities (invented, fictional or otherwise) are the main players. What this concept does not capture, however, is the other side of the imaginative power of the community in Indian history. This is an aspect which Chatterjee himself has paid attention to in a different context. It is the aspect of the community as the site of “ethical life.” There, Chatterjee pays attention to the condition of human beings who are born as members of society in which “subjective rights must be negotiated with the ‘ascribed’ field of the ethical life of the community” [Chatterjee 1993: 232].
I would like to call this site of ethical life of community, in which rightness and goodness rather than individual rights or political gains are at issue, the space of “moral society”. This space is captured by the conceptions of neither “civil society” nor “political society”. While the ideas of equality and human rights pertaining to “civil society” indeed have had profound influence upon the idea of rightness and justice, they have not replaced the morality of the community by individualist ethics. Moreover, the concerns of “moral society” cannot be reduced to the strategy of survival and political gains as in the case of “political society”. The concerns of “moral society” are about what kind of practices should be considered right and good.

Moral society is not a mere residue of the traditional community norms that stand against modern ideas and institutions. It is rather a site where continuing conceptions of what is right and good are connected and mediated to the contemporary context. Here the symbols and rhetoric of morality may be used for affirmation, resistance and / or transformation of the existing socio-political order.

I would like to point out the difference between the conceptions of “moral society” and “moral economy” here. The concept of “moral economy” of James Scott refers to “the structure of a shared moral universe, a common notion of what is just” [Scott 1976: 167]. He assumes that there is a consistent shared notion of what is just among the peasants, which he identifies in two principles, namely the “norm of reciprocity” and the “right to subsistence” [Scott 1976: 167]. Scott argues that peasants are moved to protest when their subsistence is threatened as capitalist penetration leads to the destruction of institutions of protection against starvation and hardship [Scott 1976, 1985; see also Thompson 1991]. Here the moral economy is equated with the pre-capitalist social relations and their subsistence ethic which are put in contradistinction to the market economy. However, as Sundar and Jeffery point out, “peasants and others are defending selected and sometimes invented traditions, rather than simply drawing unthinkingly upon shared norms and values; and market exchange must be assumed to be normally part of peasant economies” [Sundar and Jeffery 1999: 17].

In proposing a distinction between “moral society” and “moral economy”, I would like to emphasize firstly that the matter goes beyond the sphere of subsistence economy and its ethics. Moral society works to
legitimize or criticize politico-economic practices in a wider sphere including the market economy and democratic politics. I chose the word "society" instead of "economy" to indicate its relevance in a wider context. Secondly, I would like to stress its mediating character that connects the indigenous sense of morality to the modern institutions and ideas of democracy and civil society. Whereas the theory of "moral economy" emphasizes the difference and oppositional character between the moral subsistence economy and the capitalist economy, the actual workings of moral society mediate and go beyond such dichotomy.

Thirdly, it should be noted that there is the working of people's agency in the creation and reformation of ethics and morality. Instead of adhering to a shared moral universe, people negotiate to revise what is right and good in accordance with socio-political changes.

Moral society is the site where the continuing but also transforming indigenous sense of rightness and goodness regarding society and the state are connected in a hybrid manner to the modern rhetoric of democracy and civil rights. Ethics and moral judgements are constantly reshaped and contested in this site. There are plural and hybrid views on morality that are in contestatory, mutually supporting and/or synthesizing terms. There is no monolithic set of moral rules that dominates society in contemporary India. Nonetheless, it also seems true that postcolonial Indian society manages to maintain a sphere of interaction where the issue of what is right and good remains a common concern. It is this sphere, I suggest, which may be referred to as "moral society". Moral society is thus a contestatory and hybrid site in which what is right and good are multivocally defined and redefined through discourse and practice.

2. "Organic Ethics" in Contemporary Orissan Village

In proposing a heuristic value of the concept of moral society, I use the word "moral" as a descriptive rather than an evaluative term. Just as the political society has historical reasons to exist in the present form but contains elements that are not worthy of approval, moral society often contains elements of oppression and dominance in the name of morality that demises the ethics of a democratic nation. Nevertheless, just as "much churning in political society in the countries of the postcolonial
world... can be seen as an attempt to find new democratic forms of the modern state that were not thought out by the post-Enlightenment social consensus” [Chatterjee 2000: 47], the churning in moral society can be seen as an attempt to find new forms of governance and social relations that can mediate between the modern ideas and institutions on the one hand, and the history of the sense of rightness and goodness in modern non-Western world on the other.

As Bayly points out, there is certainly a history of “popular ideas of political morality and good government...[that] remained an encompassing discourse of South Asian politics well into the nineteenth century” [Bayly 1998: 14]. Bayly says, “some of them passed into and influenced conceptions of popular nationalism and nationality in the nineteenth century” [Bayly 1998: 14]. The core of such ideas was that “the human mind, the human body, the city and the polity were all composite and complementary organisations of bio-moral substance bound by rational self-interest and love” [Bayly 1998: 15]. As I will try to show through the ethnographic evidence given below, it is my contention that such popular ideas on bio-morality influence the sense of rightness and goodness even today. However, they are not “an encompassing discourse on South Asian politics” today since there are other legitimate discourses that co-exist—such as civil society and democracy [Bayly 1998: 14]. The discursive space concerning what is good government and right social action has a hybrid as well as fragmented character today, since there are elements from the old and the new that still need much more churning before they can constitute a coherent whole. Nevertheless, the sphere of moral society remains important as it is the sphere in which people attempt to create a moral basis for the present socio-political activities.

Let us consider the cultural schema and social practices that support reproduction of the “traditional” sense of morality using ethnographic data from Orissa. The kind of morality I describe here is a direct descendant of a history of popular ideas of politico-social morality dealt with by Bayly [Bayly 1998]. In the data that I present, it is considered that there are humoural and fluid bio-moral interactions between the land, food and human bodies, the congregate of which makes up the polity and society.7) The central ethic here is about how to perform appropriate actions in accordance with allotted positions and entitlements, since ac-
tions affect relationships and larger encompassing units through bio-
moral exchanges. In want of a better word, I call this kind of bio-moral concern “organic ethics”.

We can observe workings of such traditional morality today in the practices in the spheres of kinship, non-commercial agriculture and ritual activities. Moreover, it has influenced the villagers’ sense of morality for judging the legitimacy of contemporary politics and society in an important way. Before going on to describe the complexity and hybridity of contemporary moral society, let me explain the workings of organic ethics in spheres where they are still quite tangible.

The cultural schema regarding relationships between body, kinship and land is a case in point. Conceptions regarding reproduction of the body and social institutions of kinship are related to the continuity of the family line along with the land they possess. Each family line is seen to have a particular duty for the community according to its caste and lineage role. Right actions on the part of human bodies in interaction with nature and other human beings are considered to work towards reproducing and enhancing the prosperity of the community. The cultural schema of body, kinship and land is in close connection with and is supported by the practices and activities of the agricultural cycle combined with the annual rituals that make up the cyclic process of reproduction. Here, invocation of divine power (śakti) especially that of the local goddess as representative of the local land, is considered important for successful agricultural production. The social institutions of kinship and caste support such interaction between nature, deities and human beings. The subsistence economy and social networks based on organic ethics thus embed people in the larger cosmological world, where people commune with nature and supernatural beings.

3. Body, food and land

Let me elaborate on the relationship between the body, food and land in this bio-moral scheme. According to a general folk belief, a human body is formed when the man’s seminal fluid (birja) mixes with the woman’s sexual secretion (raja) during intercourse. Sex can be seen as one kind of bio-moral interaction. Sperm is said to make the bones and the female sexual fluid the flesh. The man’s sperm and the woman’s
womb are referred to respectively as the seed and the field. It is considered important that the male seed is planted and nurtured, so to speak, on a "proper" female field for it to grow into a body that matches the lineage and caste. Development of a proper body in a proper field is vital for fulfilling the duty prescribed as the heritage of the lineage. Hence there is the necessity of "correct" marriage alliance. Correct marriage alliance in coastal Orissa is that which is conducted between families which are equal in caste and lineage status.

Those who are related by marriage are referred to as bandhu, which may be translated as "relatives by marriage alliance". It is in fact the marriage alliance network of bandhus that make up the endogamous caste group or jati. These networks are ranked and people are very much conscious of their family status.

Ideotypically, a body born as a result of a suitable marriage alliance is fed and maintained by rice harvested from the land allocated to the father's family as "service land" (hetā or jagir). It is considered that the body requires the food harvested from the proper land and cooked by the proper person (mother or wife) in order for it to develop into a person fit to perform the necessary duties according to the family status. The proper land par excellence suiting the family is the service land. There was an arrangement (khanjā) in pre-colonial times that a family receives certain entitlements such as a share of products from the service land in lieu of the service they provide for the community and the state [cf. Tanabe 1998, 1999, in press]. Although the importance of the service land in the economic sense has decreased to a minimum, the idea that the body should be nurtured by rice harvested from one's own land continues till today. This is evident at the harvest festival (such as Lakṣmi pūjā) when the rice from the family land is used for worship and consumed only by the family members.

There is a telling expression about nurturing of the body through land. When a man occupies a service land he is said to "eat the land" (jami khaiba). This means that the entitlement holder is eating and nurturing his body from the product of the allotted land.8) There is a parallel conception here between the body, personhood and the allotted land.9)

Here, the cycle of rice production and consumption is closely connected with the seasonal cycle of nature, annual rituals and institutions of kinship and caste. Since the annual rituals supported by kinship and
caste practically and aesthetically go with the cycle of nature, they are naturally linked to the concept of the cycle of time repeated from the ancient times, that is to say, to "tradition".

Another important point about the subsistence economy which is intimately related with the cycle of nature is that the community and its members were able to maintain a sense of the sacred in their contact with nature in the process of reproduction. It is considered necessary to receive śakti or the sacred generative power from the earth-goddess for the production of food. The agricultural process is accompanied by various rites which ensure the proper transformation of śakti. The earth-goddess and manifestations of the generative power in the form of other goddesses are worshipped in the annual rituals for protection.

In the annual cycle of the seasons, clear ideas are expressed about how the land, as the mother goddess, matures in its generative power with the heat of spring and summer, made cool and fertile with the coming of the rains, then inseminated with the seed grains and becomes pregnant with the new paddy, bringing about food and prosperity to the people in the form of new harvested rice. This rice is worshipped as Lakṣmi, an aspect of the mother goddess representing prosperity and auspiciousness. This process is marked with rituals that bring about interactions among deities, nature and people, which define and confirm the role and position of each individual and family in the social network of kinship and caste.¹⁰

It is through correct performance of these rituals and timely agricultural activities which are closely interwoven that the bestowal of the blessings of mother goddess in the form of food and abundance is brought about. The food thus produced supports the bodies of persons for carrying out duties and is offered to feed the ancestors of the family and lineage. In this way, humans, ancestors, nature and gods interact in this cycle to bring about the overall reproduction of the socio-cosmos.

It is important to remember here, however, that the agricultural activities and the related rituals today do not constitute the complete picture of people's economy or worldview. Also, kinship and caste are no longer the main institutions that decide the positions of individuals in society. Kinship position does not guarantee any entitlement of politico-economic importance in society except in ritual contexts. The idea of body, lineage and land in their fluid and humoral interactions continues to be the basis of human reproduction and continuity. But the villagers
are well aware that the inherited land, paddy agriculture and annual rituals do not ensure their survival, let alone material satisfaction, in today’s consumerist world. Here, practices pertaining to organic ethics are by no means some kind of an unconsciously followed habitus embedded in an unreflected and unchanging tradition. Rather, the paddy agriculture and rituals, together with the social institutions of kinship and caste, are given special importance precisely because the village people feel that the world of interaction and mutual workings between humans, gods and nature, which provide them with the sense of ontology, is being threatened. The agricultural and ritual cycles are not only embodied but also objectified tradition whose value is often placed in contradistinction to the market economy and related modern institutions.

4. In Pursuit of Cash: Political Society and Market Economy

4.1 Colonial Dichotomy and Post-colonial Reflection

The fact that the sphere of kinship, caste, rice agriculture and annual rituals is put in contradistinction to what is seen as modern institutions means that the world of organic ethics is not complete in itself in contemporary India. It occupies only a limited part of the villagers’ life and is given importance precisely because of its “traditional” character in contrast to the “modern” institutions of cash economy and factional politics that seem to threaten harmonious existence. In people’s discourse, a dichotomous distinction is often drawn between traditional community on the one hand and the modern state and market on the other.\(^{11}\)

In Scott’s formulation of the moral economy, there is a presupposition of a natural and inevitable opposition between the moral economy on the one hand and the market economy on the other. However, in the case of India, such a dichotomy seems to have become distinct only during the colonial period. Many researchers have recently pointed out how Indian society was “traditionalized” under colonialism.\(^ {12}\) Colonial point of view equated Indian society with the “tradition” of caste and jajmani systems, which in turn were seen to be based on the old religious value of Hinduism. Against these were placed rational institutions of the market economy and modern government. As long as there was the “rule of colonial difference” [Chatterjee 1986], the dichotomy between the moral economy
and the market economy, or the opposition between organic ethics and rationality of individuals, was not questioned in any serious way by the Indian people. The elite nationalists used this “derivative” framework to establish legitimacy in their nationalist quest [Chatterjee 1986]. For the non-elite villagers, the dichotomy was very much real under colonialism as the village was traditionalized, and the colonial administration and market economy circumscribed it from outside and above.

In the post-colonial period, however, the state and market economy became omnipresent and deeply entrenched inside village life. It is in such a context that the relationship between organic ethics on the one hand, and values of democracy, equality and market exchange on the other comes to be questioned. Since there has to be a moral basis in any socio-economic practice, including politics and market exchanges, there are attempts to reinterpret and create new ethics which suit these practices. But, in many cases, politics and market economy are still seen as being outside the organic ethics of the community, and people lament the lack of morality in the spheres of what they perceive as modern institutions. Indeed, “criminalisation of our [India’s] economic and political life” [Beteille 1994: 565] is a perennial problem that has become a part of everyday life in contemporary India, and it is the amoral activities in this sphere that is a cause of great sorrow and annoyance to the Indian people themselves [cf. Mohapatra 1997].

4.2 Cash Economy and Cheating Outsiders

In many villages in Khurda, Orissa, the cultivation of cashew nuts as a cash crop, which started only in the 1970s, has grown to become one of the most important sources of cash income for the villagers. The way the cashew nuts are cultivated and turned into cash shows a stark contrast to the cycle of rice agriculture, which maintains the sense of socio-cosmological values of a moral society. Cashew nut farming involves no deities, requires no ritual and hardly any seasonal labour. There is hardly any work — ritual or practical — that marks the cycle of the annual reproduction except for the harvesting.

During harvest time, villagers have to set up huts in the cashew fields and stay there to prevent theft of the nuts. The theft of rice from the field is considered one of the biggest sins and betrayal of the community norm. It is also probably very difficult practically to cut the paddy and
take them away without being found out. I have never heard of cases of rice being stolen from the fields. Theft of cashew nuts, in contrast, is not uncommon.

After the harvest, the villagers sell the nuts to brokers mostly from outside Orissa, namely Calcutta and Hyderabad. The price of the cashew nuts fluctuate from year to year and can also change within one year. Since the prices at which the middlemen buy the cashew nuts fluctuate and differ from one day to the next, the villagers try their best to sell at the optimum moment. Conversation during this period is dominated by talk on the everyday rise and fall of the selling price of cashew nuts. Even children take part in such talk. The villagers indeed seem excited, as it is one of rare chances when they can try to make money by their own initiative.

The uncertain and fickle nature of the cashew nut business affects the villagers’ conception of cash. The amount of cash the villagers can earn depends on the unreliable and fluctuating rate which is determined outside, and the timing of the selling, which is decided individually irrespective of social relations and calendrical dates. These characteristics of the cashew nut business are in contrast with rice agriculture, which is embedded in traditional socio-cultural contexts.

While the activities in the community relationships are regulated by moral concerns, interactions with “outsiders” seem to be that of competition over “cleverness”. In business interactions, “cheating” unfortunately is not uncommon. Therefore, people often seek “connection” to ensure that the business interaction takes place with people not as outsiders but as “our people” (āmora loka). This is one of the spheres where kinship and caste networks play an important role.

People classified as “outside people” (bāhāra loka) become the village people’s target for cheating in business interactions. In the cashew nut business, for example, the business (or rather the cheating) chance comes when the buyers from Calcutta and Hyderabad approach the villages in Khurda to purchase cashew nuts. Pre-harvest buying is a usual practice in the cashew nut business, and buyers from outside often have to rely on a local middleman for the collection of cashew nuts. The middleman receives a part of the money from the buyer in advance for reservation and collection of nuts. Cheating occurs as the middleman does not give the due quantity of cashew nuts and the money given in advance is not
Villagers know that the middleman intends to cheat the buyer from the start, but do not dare to warn the buyer because, after all, the middleman is a "brother" (bhai), whereas the buyer is an "outsider". Outsiders usually cannot do anything about the cheating and the business relationship ends there and then.

I once tried to convince a villager who was involved in cheating that it was better to establish a more permanent business relationship, and that nobody would want to do business with this village if this kind of activities continued. His answer was, however, that there were plenty of buyers from outside and there was no doubt that he can make extra income every year with a new outsider. "Outsiders" here are seen as anonymous and replaceable people, who are the targets for one-time profit making and for whom no moral considerations are necessary.

4.3 Embezzlement and Bribery

Another significant irregular source of extra cash income for the villagers is embezzlement of public funds, that is, taking illegal margins from government subsidies. This practice is intimately connected with the existence of bribery. Bribery has been deeply entrenched in the post-colonial Indian administration. It is not too much to state, unfortunately, that it has become a part of the normal procedure of administration. The money, which the government officials involved in the administrative procedure receive, is often referred to as "percentage" (the English term is used for this). This is because they are considered to have a kind of "entitlement" towards a certain percentage of the total expenditure. This institutionalized bribery not only ensures extra income for the government, but also opens a way for those villagers who act as the contractors between the government officials and other villagers to make extra cash income.

For example, when there is a construction work in a village, usually a man (with certain qualifications) from the village works as a contractor. A small-scale construction work is usually dealt with at the block level, which exists between gram panchayat (village meeting) and district levels. In order to get sanction of the construction work from the government, various bureaucrats such as the Block Development Officer (B.D.O.), Junior Engineer and higher officials, local representatives like the Block Chairman and politicians like the local Member of Legislative
Assembly (M.L.A.) get involved in the process. The leaders of the faction that supports the ruling party at the state level function as a connecting point between the politico-administrative centres outside and the local society at the grass-root level. The village faction leaders are thus usually involved in the procedure of bringing government subsidies into the locality, and have a lot of say in choosing the contractor. It is usually a member of the ruling faction in the village who gets the job as the contractor.

The contractor must give "percentages", which in effect are really nothing other than bribes, to all the officials and political leaders involved in the procedure of bringing the government money to the contractor's hand. The contractor attempts to reduce the expenditure for the construction to the minimum, since he can keep the remaining money after deducting "percentages" and the actual expenditure. Naturally, the contractor will try to reduce the actual expenditure and the quality of the work is often below the planned and prescribed standard. There is, however, an understanding between the contractor and the superintending officials such as the Junior Engineer, who has received a "percentage", and so the quality of the work does not come into question.

Another supposedly checking body in liberal-democratic society, the "public", does not function here either. In the logic of the community, the contractor and the faction leaders are "brothers" as far as the villagers are concerned. Although the villagers may ask them to host a feast as brothers, which is often done among the main faction members, they cannot accuse them in the name of "public good". Besides, the government subsidy is a resource from "outside" which the villagers feel they must try to gain from as much as possible. There is certainly an understanding among the people involved that the government subsidy should be used for public utility, at least at the level of official discourse. However, in most cases, the necessity for survival and desire for cash gain, that is, the logic of political society, supersedes the logic of civil society. As far as the villagers are concerned, the government subsidy is one of the important outside sources of cash income, which should be maximized in a "clever" manner if necessary. Being "clever" is considered undesirable within the community sphere, but a necessary evil in the sphere of political society.13)
5. Factional Politics in Rural Orissa

5.1 Factional Politics and Democracy in Post-colonial India

As I have already indicated, the practice of factions in village Orissa is one of the main routes through which people attempt to get governmental resources. Since the governmental resources have come to be of considerable importance in the local cash economy, decision making regarding their distribution have become an important political issue in the village. The villagers have formed political factions to influence the flow of governmental resources to their own advantage. The existence of factional politics is lamented in the village as one of the primal examples of the corrupted modernity, where struggle for self-gain, rather than harmony of the community, is given priority. At the same time, however, it is also true that factional politics exemplify people's agency in political society to adapt to the new opportunities for political participation under democracy.

Factional politics have taken root in Indian villages as the people began to take part in democratic politics in the post-colonial period. The popularization of factional politics is related to the formation of new opportunities for the villagers to get resources directly from the government. In rural Khurda, the villagers began to form political factions mainly in the 1970s. Today, factional politics is very active in coastal Orissan villages.

As Chatterjee says, “if we have to give a name to the major form of mobilization by which political society (parties, movements, non-party political formations) tries to channel and order popular demands on the developmental state, we should call it democracy” [Chatterjee 2000: 46–7]. Ironically, the formation of factional politics in post-colonial India indeed exemplifies the diffusion of the idea and institution of democracy where “everyone can imagine exercising some influence” [Khilnani 1999: 60] upon the distribution of the state resources. It is ironical to call this a development of democracy, since factional politics is often carried out according to the logic of “majoritarian populism” [Fuller and Harris 2000: 25] where electoral votes are sought after at the expense of the ethics of substantive democracy where the rights of minorities and the universal public good should be respected. This is a typical example of one of the fundamental paradoxes of democracy in India, namely the
incongruity between the "institutional logic of democratic forms" and the "logic of popular mobilisation" [Kaviraj 1991: 93].

5.2 Function and Structure of Faction

Let me clarify the constitution and function of what I refer to as a "faction" here. I employ the term "faction" here to refer to the group called daḷa at the village level in Orissa. Although the constitution of a daḷa differs from village to village, it is primarily a political clique with several oligarchic leaders (netā) who form a fairly stable core. Most typically, there are two groups within the dominant caste which form the basis of factions that are supported by other caste groups.

One of the most important functions of a faction is to control distribution of the governmental resources that come to the village through politico-administrative channels. The members of the faction whose supporting party is in power at the national and/or state level can expect to have priority in gaining a share of benefits, such as subsidized distribution of seeds, fertilizers and rationed rice, government jobs, political offices, official contracts, development scheme, place in educational institutions and pensions. If they go through the right political channels, they can also expect better treatment or at least avoid harassment from the bureaucracy, such as tahasildar (land-officer) office and block office and also from the police. The resources are distributed among the faction members according to their ability to speak out and contribute within the faction. Political status and influence are considered to be honourable and are sought after in the village.

The members of factions, in return, act as the main supporting body of political parties at the time of elections. Through such electoral support, the leaders of factions develop rapport with higher political leaders, such as the Member of Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) and Member of Parliament (M.P.), the ties with whom ensure the network of influences for the flow of resources to the faction when they come into power. Usually, a faction has allegiance to a particular political party depending on the ties of network the leaders of the faction have developed over time.

The leaders of the village factions have pivotal roles in forming connections with higher political leaders, local administrative offices, police and court. Such connections are vital in gaining governmental resources
and administrative favours, and also to ensure protection from political
and police harassment for the faction members when the need arises.
The faction leaders are usually comparatively educated and have ade-
quate oratory and literary abilities. They use these abilities together
with their kin-caste-personal and political connections to help faction
members with various administrative processes. The leaders can help
faction members to apply for various government benefits and loans,
register land purchases and sales, make police and court cases, apply for
higher educational institutions, and arrange to provide “facility” (an
English term used as an euphemism for cheating) in student examina-
tions etc.

The faction members and other supporting villagers are often depen-
dent on the leaders for matters which require certain connections and
knowledge in the procedures. The leaders also act as political manoeuvrers
at the time of elections. They often receive money from the supporting
political party and candidate and go about visiting key persons in and
around village to arrange for vote banks for the candidate they support.
They distribute money in return for the promise of giving vote to their
candidate. The leaders of different castes in the same village or other
village members may ask for further promise from the faction leaders for
shares of benefits once they win in the election.

5.3 Factional Politics and the Discourse of Corruption

Not many people in India see this present condition of politics as a
favourable one. Indeed, there is increasing condemnation of corruption
from every strata of Indian society [e.g. Visvanathan and Sethi 1998,
Fuller and Bénéï 2000]. One also hears many criticisms of political cor-
rup tion and factional politics in the village. The village people condemn
the unlawful acquirements of percentages and the frequent quarrels and
fights related to factional politics. The villagers lament over this situa-
tion and say that it is all the result of the money-oriented modern economy
and self-centred politics. They express hatred towards the “kāli juga”
(Skt. kāli yuga. The fourth and the last age of kāli: kāli means quarrel
and disharmony) in which morality of the good old days is collapsing.
The villagers often speak of how the village was once united but has
broken up due to rivalry and hatred with the coming of modern factional
politics.
Akhil Gupta argues that "the discourse of corruption . . . plays th(e) dual role of enabling people to construct the state symbolically and to define themselves as citizens" [Gupta 1995: 389]. It is true that people define themselves apart from the corrupted state through the discourse of corruption. But Gupta does not go on to show what they define themselves as through such discourse of corruption. He seems to argue that the people see corruption as being a part of the state to which they themselves do not belong. However, as I have tried to show above, the target of people’s criticisms is not only the state but also extends to the political society at large. People perceive and talk quite clearly about the fact that corrupted agents do not only belong to the state, but also to the whole of political society engaged in distribution of the state resources. According to my understanding, the discourse of criticism of corruption actually belongs to the discursive sphere of the moral society, which attempts to distinguish itself from corruption of the state or the political society. This brings us back to the question, "What is moral society?" Let us then consider what the space of moral society is trying to define.

6. Moral Society as a Mediating Sphere

Now, the question is, "Where does this sense of morality and value come from?" Does the sense of rightness that lead to criticism of corruption exist in contemporary India because "the impersonal norms and values of the modern state have been widely internalised by ordinary Indians" as Fuller and Harris, along with Parry, argue [Fuller and Harris 2000: 14, Parry 2000: 29]? If we assume that the sense of morality comes from the value of the modern state which the people have internalized, we are in effect saying that the real subject of modern Indian history is the modern state to which people are subjected. The problem with this kind of logic is that the agency of the people is lost. That is to say, this kind of argument presupposes a modernization process centring around the modern state as the main agent with a teleological assumption. However, if it is the case that the state in India is largely influenced by social forces as Fuller and Harris themselves argue [Fuller and Harris 2000: 14], this is rather a strange argument.

Rather than simply assuming that state values are internalized by the people, I suggest we should see how the socio-political values of right-
ness and goodness have been formed and transformed in interaction with the forms of state politics and civil ideas in history. The sense of the good government today is also formed in this space of negotiation and interaction in history. It is this space of mediation in which the sense of rightness and goodness of the people are in interaction with the modern socio-political ideas and practices that I would like to call “moral society”. Let me give some examples for illustration. 

Case 1. I was walking with a Khandayat (the dominant peasant-militia caste) leader in the village before the Ramachandi festival, which is the most important community festival in the region. There was a Hari (“untouchable” sweeper-drummer caste) man cleaning the street. The Khandayat leader said to me, “Hari people clean the whole village before the festival”. Then, the Hari man turned around to me and said, “If we do not clean, these people hit us”, pointing at the Khandayat leader.

The Khandayat leader seems to have wanted to imply the idiom of organic ethics in order to emphasize the harmonious, cooperative aspect of the community festival in which different caste people have different responsibilities. However, such harmonious model was defied by the Hari person. His statement clearly indicated that he was doing the cleaning job because of the violent sanction by the dominant caste group and not because he accepted the present system. This Hari person was well aware that there are alternatives to the present social set-up and refused to take the present one for granted.

However, this does not imply that organic ethics is a waning morality that is losing importance in the village today. The same Hari person, when it comes to drum-beating in the festival, accepts the job rather more willingly. One Hari person said to me with a touch of pride, “Unless we beat the drum, the goddess does not come to the village”. Many young male Hari work in the cities nowadays, but some come back to the village during the festival to do the drum-beating. This shows that the idea of playing one’s role in the organic whole itself is not denied as long as there is an egalitarian respect for each role. The Hari person who was sweeping was defying what he saw as hierarchical and oppressive and was trying to escape the work he considered as degrading.

The criticisms against oppression are probably based on the people’s increasing awareness of modern civil values of human rights and equal-
ity. This does not mean, however, that their awareness will lead to the formation of a civil society based on individuals. Rather, there seems to be a process of redefinition of the contents of the prescribed duties and entitlements in the community of organic ethics. Moral society absorbs new ideas and vocabulary within itself in a hybrid manner and transforms its contents to suit the new environment. This can be illustrated by another example.

Case 2. Cowherds used to carry the palanquins of gods in festivals and that of upper caste members in marriage processions. However, they began to refuse to carry the palanquins of upper castes in the 1970s. The upper castes threatened them and argued that they should perform their traditional duty. The Cowherds answered back by saying that their real traditional role was only to carry the palanquins of gods in religious rituals, but subsequently the upper castes had forced them to carry them as well. They argued that this deviation from real tradition should be rectified. When the discussion did not result in agreement, the Cowherds told the upper caste people that if they continued to force them to carry palanquins for them, they would not carry palanquins even for deities in the village festival. As the time of the village festival approached, the upper caste people had to give in and gave their word that they would only ask them to carry the palanquins of deities. More disputes followed after the festival, but as the vehicle used for the bridegroom in marriage procession gradually changed from the palanquin to the “ambassador” (the Indian made automobile), the topic was no longer brought up.

Here we can see the reconstruction of tradition through a selective procedure. The Cowherd people saw the work of carrying palanquins for the upper castes as degrading according to their sense of dignity. However, instead of denying the traditional role or the organic ethics altogether, they decided to redefine what they saw as constituting “real tradition”. When this was denied by the upper castes, the Cowherd people resisted by sabotaging the ritual duty in the village festival. The upper castes had to give in, probably because they did not want to be held responsible for disturbing the proper performance of the community festival. The Cowherds were ready to accept their role for the deities and they continue their ritual role of carrying deities in the festival till today. Thus, in this case too, we see that the contents of the specific
duties are redefined to suit the newly emergent sentiment of dignity, as the Cowherd people feel that carrying palanquins for the upper caste people is degrading. Here also we can see the process of transformation of the moral society. This kind of revision of the existing customs comes about as people begin to reflect upon the prevalent social set-up as being something that can be changed and see possibilities of alternatives.

Case 3. One young Barber man opened a hair “salon” (the English word salon is used for the barber shop) in Garh Manitri in 1990. This was the first time in this village that a Barber offered the service on payment basis outside the so-called “jajmani relations”. I asked him why he wanted to open a hair cut salon. He said, “Instead of serving masters (sānta), I wanted to do my work on my own. Here, it is my shop and I am the owner (mālika)”. Since this Barber man was the son of the head Barber who undertook the ritual works, such as carrying a torch in the community festival, I asked him whether he wishes to take over his father’s role in the festival. He said, “When the time comes, I will decide. If I feel that I want to do it, I will do it. I do not want other people to tell me to do so. Previously, I did not feel like doing it, but now I am gradually beginning to think that I should do it. It is an honourable work. It is a service for the goddess”.

This young Barber man decided to pull himself out of the “jajmani relations” in order to become an independent owner of a barber shop. He did not opt to remain in the “moral economy” where patron-client relationship will at least give him an assurance of survival and guarantee of subsistence. He preferred to put himself in a market relationship, which might lack guarantee but would grant him a position of an independent owner and place him in equal exchange relationships with customers. Regarding his ritual duty in the community, however, his position is more nuanced. He does not want to be forced to do the ritual duty, but sees the job as an honourable one and considers accepting the duty when the time comes. He seems to accept that there is some meaning in the community ritual and applies organic ethics there. He says he will do it not because of the community pressure, but because he feels it is his service for the goddess. In my understanding, it is this attitude of service or self-sacrifice for a higher principle that is at the basis of organic ethics.

Organic ethics is combined with a particular kind of social organiza-
tion in history. But as that particular kind of social organization — jajmani relations in this case — becomes obsolete, there has to be some change. In post-colonial India, jajmani relations have been replaced by market exchanges in the sphere where impersonal and alienable goods and services can take over. However, the division of labour has remained in the ritual sphere where the organic ethics is maintained. The young Barber man accepts both the ritualized organic ethics and the market exchange relations. His agency works here to reflect upon and choose what he feels is worth keeping or not. Moral society is a space where such reflexive agents interact to define and redefine what is right and good.

Case 4. There was a meeting in which committee members for the new college in Garh Manitri were to be decided. The factional leaders attempted to include as many faction members as possible in the committee. The candidates of the factions were mostly Khandayat. In the course of the meeting, one young Washerman spoke out and said that there should be a representative from each hamlet in Garh Manitri in the committee. His statement was met by loud shouts from faction members telling him to keep quiet. One faction leader suggested that the committee members should be elected on the basis of merit and recommendation. The discussion went back again to selecting people from the two factions. After the meeting, one Khandayat made a comment about the Washerman and said, “It is all very well to say that there should be one representative from each hamlet. But that would not work. Committee members must possess a certain quality. What quality do they have? Each family has had its role in the village. We have been the leaders of the village in history and this quality cannot be acquired overnight”. The young Washerman later said to me, “The factions are destroying the village. Everybody must cooperate to develop the village. That is why I said there should be a representative from each hamlet. Then there can be real cooperation involving everybody”.

The idea of representation has long been a part of the moral sense of justice in the political field. It has acquired legitimacy, along with the idea of democracy, in the discursive space of what constitutes proper administration and government. There seems to be two conflicting ideas of representation here. The logic of “representation of particulars” demands that each social group should be represented, whereas the logic of
“representation of majority” says that the majority should rule. The latter is supported by the democratic institution of electoral politics where numbers matter. The young Barber man employed the logic of “representation of particulars” when demanding that there should be a representative from each hamlet of the village, which more or less corresponds to a caste group. Against this, the faction leader employed the logic of “representation of majority”, which works in favour of the political primacy of the dominant caste Khaṇḍāyats.

In factional politics, the state resources have to be distributed in proportion to political influence in order for a maximum number of votes to be secured. In the above public meeting, this factional logic of political society was reigning at the beginning. But, when the young Washerman presented a legitimate argument based on the logic of representation of particulars, the faction leaders had to respond by resorting to another legitimate discourse. So, one Khaṇḍāyat leader took up the logic of meritocracy and connected this to the logic of majority representation.

In this complex situation, plural and contestatory ideas and discourses regarding rightness and goodness appeared on the scene. These included ideas of “representation of particulars”, “representation of majority” and meritocracy. Moreover, it is interesting to note that there were also two forms of organic ethics legitimising two opposing political positions. When the Khaṇḍāyat man mentioned the necessity of a certain “quality” in a committee member, he employed the discourse of organic ethics in the sense that each man should stick to his traditional position in the hierarchy. This “hierarchical organic ethics” worked along with the logic of “representation of majority” to deny representation to the lower castes. Meanwhile, the young Washerman employed the discourse of organic ethics in the sense that each person should have a properly recognized and respectable role. This discourse of “egalitarian organic ethics” was combined with the logic of “representation of particulars” to promote representation from different sections of the community.

It should be noted that these ideas and discourses of morality were not only used instrumentally for political purposes but were also the focus of concern in themselves. Any action in society must have some kind of legitimacy. Decisions regarding the distribution of resources cannot be made on the basis of sheer power and violence. They have to be backed by values and ideas that provide legitimacy. Moral society is a contestatory
space where the activities in political society are evaluated and judged in terms of their legitimacy from multiple points of view.

7. Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to pay attention to the space of moral society in post-colonial India in order to see the possibilities of viable ethics and morality as part of a continuous development of the country’s history, taking into consideration the influences from outside. The concept of moral society, I hope, will help us to throw light on the scope of development for new socio-political ethics in contemporary India.

Moral society is a creative space where multifarious ideas and vocabularies of the old — the rhetoric of organic ethics such as dharma and kartabya (duty) — and the new — such as civil rights and democracy — are employed in a hybrid manner to negotiate and define what is right and good. As such, the space of moral society can also work to criticize and transform existing social relations to suit the contemporary moral sentiments. In this sense, moral society is a space of mediation where attempts are made to connect the indigenous sense of rightness, through its reformation, to the present politico-economic ideas and practices.

If a respectable democracy is to take root in Indian society, a popular common sense regarding good government and political morality should be developed, and this must also be applicable in modern politics. Also, in order to develop a healthy market economy involving the local village society, a common sense of moral commitment to contracts needs to be nurtured so that people can proceed with economic transactions with trust. The development of such common sense would only be possible if the existing moral society with its sense of rightness can find ways to reconcile itself with the existing political society and the market economy. It is also necessary that moral society reconciles itself with ideas and institutions of civil society in order to provide popular endorsement to the current institutions of modernity.

As Chatterjee points out, there is “an emerging opposition between modernity and democracy, i.e. between civil society and political society” [Chatterjee 2000: 47] in today’s post-colonial world. However, if we look at the sphere of moral society, the ideas and institutions of both community and civil society are taken together in a hybrid manner in the
search for new ethics. Here, moral society may be seen as a space of
mediation where attempts are made to reconcile civil society and politi-
cal society. If there is emergent opposition, there are also attempts at
reconciliation. It is not possible to predict what kind of new ethics will
come out of the present churning. However, it is probably not helpful to
over-emphasize the opposition between modernity and democracy, civil
society and political society, or capital and community here. It is more
necessary to see the possibilities of reconciliation and mediation between
the two if we are to hope for the creation of viable ethics in the contem-
porary post-colonial world.

I have suggested in this paper to pay attention to moral society in
India in order to see the space of contestatory and negotiatory attempts
at connecting and reconciling the history of popular sense of rightness
and goodness with the present practices of democracy and ideas and
institutions of civil society. This paper suffices if it is successful in indi-
cating that such a space of churning indeed exists.

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Notes

1) Nevertheless, the ideas and ideals of civil society seem to have had profound influence
on the conception of justice in moral society.

2) The reference is to Hegel’s concept in The Philosophy of Right [Hegel 1952].

3) Here, it is assumed that “Poor peasants and others draw upon these traditional
rights and customs when faced with attempts by landlords or capitalists to impose
new, more contractual and market-based notions of rights and obligations” [Sundar
and Jeffery 1999: 17 in reference to Thompson and Scott]. However, as I have
argued elsewhere, in post-colonial India, it was the weaker clients who sought con-
tractual and market-based exchanges in preference to the customary patron-client
“jajmani” relationships [Tanabe 2001]. Also see the example of case 3 in section 6 of
this paper.

4) See Brass 1991 for criticisms of the notion of moral economy from a Marxist’s point
of view.

5) Sundar and Jeffery suggest that “social forces in India and abroad have combined to
attempt to create a new moral economy for subordinate groups in Indian forests”
[Sundar and Jeffery 1999: 18]. What they are talking about is not really the creation
of a new sense of morality but the creation of institutions of social entitlements and
obligations of subordinate groups. It is true that there are attempts to create such
social institutions. But what I am trying to problematise with the concept of moral
society is much broader than this kind of “new moral economy”. It is about the creation of a new sense of rightness and goodness — not just a new system of resource management — that is born from the history of post-colonial India.

6) Tom Brass argues that, in some cases, “the continuation of pre-capitalist socio-economic forms in non-metropolitan contexts is in fact a realisation and not a negation of the universalist project of capitalism” [Brass 1991: 182, italics in original]. In the case of India, what was seen as the customary and traditional socio-economic system was in fact a product of the socio-economic changes under colonialism. The so-called “jajmani system” in India is a case in point [cf. Fukazawa 1972; Fuller 1977, 1989; Gough 1981: 204; Mizushima 1990; Sato 1990; Mayer 1993; Tanabe 1998]. The “jajmani system” and relating landholding structure that took shape during the colonial period served the colonial economy and can indeed be seen as a realization of the universalist project of capitalism. Therefore, in the case of Indian villages, it was not “the continuation of pre-capitalist socio-economic forms” but the colonial transformation in the direction of “traditionalization” of socio-economic relations that served the imperialist and capitalist project.

7) Marriot should be given credit for pointing out the existence of ideas regarding exchange of “code-substance” in Indian society [Marriot 1976]. See also Daniel 1984.

8) The organic and humoural relationship between personhood and land is strengthened by the fact that a particular piece of land allotted to a family often has a proper name suggestive of the nature of the owner’s identity. For example, Khumbāra hetā (Potter’s service land), “pradhān hetā” (village head’s service land), “Rāmaḥaṇḍinkha bhogo khaṇṭā jamā” (arranged land for Rāmaḥaṇḍi’s offerings. This is the Khond priest’s land).

9) Oral histories are told of how a person of a family obtained land. These serve to legitimise the land-owning family’s position in the region and to reconfirm their unique identity based on history. The stories concerning the acquiring of land are invariably related to the king as the donor of the land [cf. Tanabe 2000]. For example, it is said a Brāhmaṇa received a land called “rice water land” (torāṇīṇa nāla) after he offered the king water rice and the king was satisfied.


11) Partha Chatterjee discusses of the dichotomy of inner spiritual domain and outer material domain held by the nationalist [Chatterjee 1993]. On the similarity and difference between the dichotomy held by the elite nationalists and that by the non-elite villagers, see Tanabe 1995.


13) I once questioned a contractor from the village regarding why the people did not complain about the roads, the condition of which deteriorates every year due to the poor quality work resulting from corruption. He said that it is in fact better that the roads get damaged quickly because they can request the government again for funding for their repairs.

14) Although in the Nehruvian idea of modern Indian politics, politics was to pursue the “public good” of civil society beyond the petty interests of peculiar communities, the logic of election and numbers turned Indian politics towards popularization
in later period [cf. Kaviraj 1991: 90]. There the acquirement of vote banks had to be paid back through distribution of resources, especially after Indira Gandhi’s regime [Khilnani 1999].

15) For the discussion on the nature of faction, see Hardiman 1982.

16) He unfortunately stops at arguing that “the very same processes that enable one to construct the state also help one to imagine these other social groupings — citizens, communities . . ., social groups . . ., coalitions, classes, interest groups, civil society, polity, ethnic groups, subnational groups, political parties, trade unions, and farmer organizations” [Gupta 1995: 393].

17) The fact that people just did not internalize the norms and values of the modern state as a whole can be proved by the following simple example. The concept of “secularism” (in the sense of a-religious rationality as behavioural principle in the public sphere) has not gained popular acceptance or internalization among the majority of the population. I think this shows the people’s agency in selecting what is acceptable to their sense of morality.

18) I have been inspired by Mohapatra 2001 for a context-sensitive analysis on conditions of civility and substantive democracy.

19) The opposition between the logic of proportional representation and that of meritocracy is a familiar topic in regard to the problem of reservation in state-level politics as well.

REFERENCES


