

# Rashomon Revisited

## Contending Narratives on a Gang Rape in West Bengal

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The precise truth of what actually happened in the case of the recent gang rape of a Santal woman in Suri town in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal is obscured by the overlapping, self-interested narratives of different actors, like in Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*. Is it even possible to go beyond the "Rashomon effect" to make sense of such incidents?

In Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950), the celebrated Japanese filmmaker presents viewers with four contending narratives of the death of a samurai in a forest. The woodcutter, a key witness who reported the murder found the dead samurai, alleges that a brigand had killed him in a duel after raping his wife. The brigand admits in court to killing the samurai after a duel, but insists that he had only seduced, not raped the samurai's wife. The wife claims that she had been raped by the brigand, but having fainted subsequently, she did not know how exactly her husband died. Finally, the deceased samurai appears to testify before the magistrate. He says that his wife had been raped by the brigand, after which she urged the brigand to kill her husband, but the brigand refused to comply. The samurai then claimed that he killed himself.

The precise truth of what actually happened is obscured by the overlapping, self-interested narratives of different actors. Did the samurai kill himself or was he murdered? Was the samurai's wife raped? Did she want her husband killed? Kurosawa does not allow us as viewers to reach any definite conclusions. Social scientists and historians are often placed in the same position as Kurosawa's viewers. We cannot always be sure of what really happened in a particular situation. All we have are contending narratives of

self-interested actors, each of which reveals a small shard of reality even as it contradicts another. Anthropologists call it the "Rashomon effect" (Heider 1988).

We see a Rashomon effect at work after the recent gang rape of a Santal woman in the little-known town of Suri in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Initial news reports alleged that the woman had been gang-raped under orders from a local panchayat. The woman's crime apparently lay in her romantic liaison with a non-adviasi man, of which Santal village elders and youth alike disapproved. Some "national" English-language dailies even went on to suggest that punishments such as rape were typically "tribal". A reworked version of long-standing colonial arguments concerning barbarism versus civilisation thus seeps into the postcolonial present.

Almost as soon as the initial reports trickled in, a coherent response took shape on social media, the blogosphere, and their real-life correlates. The response goes something like this: adviasi communities are inherently peace-loving and pro-women. Violence and rape are, according to these clicktivists, virtually unknown in adviasi life. Moreover, it is claimed that women occupy a centrality in adviasi lives and livelihoods. The implication is clear enough: either no rape had occurred at all or the rapists were non-advasis or "outsiders" (*dikus*). Here, again, we may see an old colonial argument revived to defend a view of simple, pacifistic, gender-sensitive savages, from whom moderns estranged from their roots have much to learn.

Subsequently, a third narrative emerged. This focused on party politics and its impact on intra-community politics among the Santals of Subalpur village. A member of the legislative assembly

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affiliated to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) was believed to be one of the key signatories of the panchayat resolution ordering the rape of the concerned Santal woman if she refused to pay a hefty fine of Rs 25,000. According to this version of events, Santal men may have been prominent among the rapists, but the mastermind was the TMC representative, Ajoy Mondal, a non-advias. As such, the gang rape had indeed occurred, a combination of Santals and non-Santals were guilty of the crime, and the incident itself demonstrated the problems that arise when modern representative institutions are melded with “traditional” advias village norms.

A fourth narrative emphasised a different kind of modern politics over romance and marriage between advias women and non-advias men in Birhum and beyond. Santal and other advias women are, according to proponents of this view, lured by non-advias men into sex and marriage outside the community. Women such as the rape survivor from Subalpur village, understood as the basis for maintaining and reproducing advias communities into the future, are depicted here as assets lost to “outsiders”. That such romances and marriages frequently lead women to migrate to other locations amplifies anxieties for defenders of the advias village community. Such anxieties existed earlier in the form of older Santal institutions such as *bitlaha*, a form of social ostracism for romances and marriages to dikus, as well as a range of fines imposed by village councils (for more clarity on this point, see Hansdak 2014). In recent times, it is not implausible that Santal youth have extended the range of penalties that may be imposed on errant women in their villages.

### Contesting the Tribe

It is not my task here to adjudicate the case, that is, to determine the exact course of events in Suri and Subalpur before ascertaining the culpability of various individuals who currently stand accused in court. Indeed, it is my argument here that a “Rashomon effect” is necessarily at work for those of us who seek to make sense of such incidents, whether from near or afar. It is worth

recalling here Partha Chatterjee’s (2002) point, contra Carlo Ginzburg’s in *The Judge and the Historian* (1999), that the historian (or social scientist) is not in a position analogous to a judge in a court of law: not only does the nature of “evidence” differ for the judge and the historian, but, as we learn from the re-constructed narratives concerning the enigmatic Kumar of Bhawal, “truth” itself is an elusive notion in human affairs. Moreover, as Kurosawa suggests in *Rashomon*, what really happened is less interesting than the juxtaposition of contending, self-interested narratives that overlap only partially with each other.

The partially overlapping, yet contending narratives that have emerged after the gang rape in Suri this January, however, do tell us a great deal in themselves. The narratives, I argue, help us appreciate how, despite fierce contestations over the notion and its real-life analogues, the tribe retains its vitality in contemporary India. The debates today are as old as the notion of tribe itself (Fried 1975). Votaries of progress clamour for civilising, improving or, in more recent terms, developing those hill- and forest-dwelling subjects who have been designated as tribes. At the same time, anti-modernists yearning for the noble savage from a bygone golden age seek to conserve and protect the same tribes from extinction. Those who are labelled violent, blood-thirsty savages by some are peace-loving, gender-sensitive souls to others. What appear to be resolutely opposed to each other nonetheless turn out to be two sides of the same coin. The notion of tribe is a shared one: here are vestiges from the primeval past among us in the modern world with customs and traditions so different from ours that we can either be repulsed or fascinated by them.

That the tribe has its origins in European colonial vocabularies of administration and law is now well-established within academia, yet strikingly underappreciated outside it. The rise of discourses of indigeneity worldwide since the 1980s has revived its flagging career in no small measure (Kuper 2005). The term itself has no obvious analogues in south Asian languages (or indeed, African, south-east Asian, and Latin American

languages). Yet it has acquired a chimerical reality for both opponents and defenders alike, taking on a life of its own in statist discourses and everyday life. Those designated tribes have also understandably appropriated the term and its implied attributes to question and combat their marginalisation within modern India. Within advias communities, therefore, it is common to find the same battles between the forces of “modernity” and “tradition” that one finds outside it. Often, as I have shown elsewhere (Chandra 2013), these battles within rural advias communities today take place across generational lines. Tribal elders, who have helped to produce and interpret customary laws since the late 19th century, were key stipend-earning functionaries of the colonial state and their authority in the postcolonial era has followed accordingly (Sen 2012). The “modernity of tradition” thus encounters rebellious youth who seek to remake custom and community anew. The trajectories of modern state-making and advias community-making are, paradoxically, so deeply intertwined that the contradictions within each are mirrored in the other, and only a thin, blurry line separates “state” and “society” in everyday life.

### Gender and Advias

Women in advias communities have invariably been at the heart of contestations over tribes. In a fascinating attempt to introduce the study of gender and sexuality into advias history-writing in India, Shashank Sinha (2005) points to the centrality of women who were abducted or violated sexually by dikus from the earliest accounts of advias rebellions. The Kol Insurrection of 1831-32, for instance, was precipitated by the alleged abduction and rape of two wives of Bindrai Manki by the *munshi* of Chakradharpur thana in the erstwhile Porahat raj. Stories of violated women who brought dishonour to rural communities were also the basis for Sidhu and Kanu, both *manjhis* (headmen) in the Santal village system, to launch their famous *Hul* or uprising in 1855. That the sexuality of women, whether “pure” or violated, is central to defining what is moral in a community is, of course,

hardly peculiar to tribes. Indeed, it is among the oldest tropes known to mankind as the epics crafted around the abduction of Helen and Sita suggest. The same principle was at work, albeit on a national scale, during the recent celebration of the young woman rechristened “Nirbhaya” in popular discourse after her gruesome gang rape on 16 December 2012. There is, in sum, nothing oddly “tribal” about the anxieties over feminine sexuality that characterise the politics of community-making.

The singular importance of women in defining and maintaining the boundaries of adivasi communities may be seen, however, in the oft-repeated claim that adivasi women migrating outside scheduled areas and/or marrying diku men weaken the overall community. The historian Samita Sen (2012) has recently shown how stories of “kidnappings” in the late 19th century of Munda and Oraon women taken to the Assam tea plantations from rural Chhottanagpur stemmed from the shared interest of village elders and missionaries to retain these women within emerging patriarchal structures. Notably, many of these “kidnapped” women who were interviewed later by colonial officers denied that they had been kidnapped and emphasised their decision to leave their rural homes. In a similar vein, we may infer from the recent work of Alpa Shah (2006) that the denial of any meaningful agency to “trafficked” women who migrate seasonally to brick kilns outside the scheduled areas remains as relevant to adivasi community-making today as before. The self-narratives of these migrant women from Jharkhand, however, reveal complex economies of sexuality, pleasure and freedom away from the rural patriarchies back home.

Women as markers of adivasi community may also be seen in an entirely different context from exogamy and outmigration, namely, accusations of witchcraft. As the painstaking archival research of Shashank Sinha reveals, witchcraft accusations were intimately linked to concerns over community and threats to it from elements within and without. It is not difficult then to appreciate Sinha’s point that times of insurgency

and rebellion heightened the anxieties over community and produced a spike in witchcraft accusations. This is as true today during the Maoist insurgency as it was during the Santal Hul of 1855 when older, especially childless, unmarried or widowed, women were suspected by *ojhas* to be witches and their presence within adivasi villages was held responsible for disease and death in times of violence and uncertainty. Just as the healthy body needed to be freed of pathogens, it was and continues to be believed that the communitarian body, too, needs to be freed of internal threats to its well-being.

### Conclusions

The contestations over women in rural adivasi communities today do not come down to us from the hoary past. They are distinctively “modern” insofar as they concern the definition and policing of the communities themselves. Both definition and policing cut across the state-society divide. Customary laws in operation since the late 19th century concretise the power of tribal elders to define right and wrong in civil matters within communities under their jurisdiction. At the same time, social movements and insurgencies, which seek to remake the contours of political authority, and indeed, adivasi communities themselves, display their own anxieties over women within these communities. Older and newer patriarchies thus emerge across the thin, blurry line dividing state and society in everyday life. The inability of women to inherit land and other forms of property, the proscriptions on exogamy, and accusations of witchcraft are merely symptoms of a wider malaise. So much is concealed by the chimerical notion of tribe and the contending, self-interested narratives that arise from it, and yet its vitality remains a testament to the modernity of tradition and the contestations over it that define postcoloniality in India and elsewhere.

To return to the gang rape in Suri, what the contending narratives share is, ironically, more revealing than how they differ from each other. To the extent that women’s bodies and sexuality are deemed crucial to the reproduction of the tribe as a concept and as a lived reality, what

goes unchallenged in recent narratives concerning the Suri case is the community per se. Modernists and anti-modernists as well as adivasis and non-adivasis commenting on the case have seemed oblivious to the politics of making and remaking community. That gender and sexuality hold the key to unravelling this politics of tribal community ought to come as no surprise. As the recent Nirbhaya case demonstrated ably, communitarian anxieties and contestations over women’s bodies, taken to be symbolic representations of entire communities, are all too obvious around us. Those postcolonial subjects who are designated tribal may, after all, have more in common than we may be willing to concede. It is, admittedly, far easier to depict them as stone-age remnants, suitable for civilising missions and political romanticism in equal measure. If the contending narratives in Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* reveal the self-interestedness of their makers, much the same may be said for the commentaries that have followed the Suri case.

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