



Cultural Politics of Life: Biomoral Humanosphere and Vernacular Democracy in Rural Orissa, India

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Akio Tanabe**

I. Global Area Studies for Humansphere-sustainable Development

I-1. Humansphere and Human Life

In the Initiative 4 of G-COE entitled ‘Studies in the potentialities of local culture, institution and technology’, we aim to discover and understand the cultural, religious, social and institutional resources in localities and regions of the world in our attempt to pursue the paradigm of humansphere-sustainable development. Our focus is on human agency in humansphere, that is, human endeavor to cognize and act upon the particular socio-cultural and ecological environment in which they are embedded.

Humansphere is socio-ecological environment for human beings. It is not only bio-physical environment that acts as a selection pressure for survival of the fittest. Nor is it merely a socio-cultural system of human relations and meanings. Humansphere is a composite of both socio-cultural and bio-physical elements that constitute the living environment of human beings.

Humansphere perspective focuses on our relations and interactions with the environment, going beyond the polarities of objectivism/subjectivism and nature/society. Our living environment is dialogically constituted. That is to say, humansphere both conditions and is conditioned by human beings and their way of life. A focus on culture is important here because it is culture—as a way of being in an environment—which acts as the medium between human beings and nature (geosphere and biosphere). Attention on humansphere and its transformation thus brings us to bear upon the historical interaction between nature, culture and human life.

Human life itself consists of and is maintained through relations and interactions with other beings in humansphere—water, air, light, earth, plants, animals, human, artifacts etc. Life process involves constant exchange of substances with other beings. This necessarily leads to moral issues concerning allocation (who), manner (how,

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when, where) and choice (what) of resource usage (production, consumption and disposal). Thus human life inevitably entails both bio-material and socio-moral aspects. Humansphere perspective sheds light on human life as biomoral interaction with environment. I use the word ‘biomoral humansphere’ here in order to emphasize this aspect. Humansphere as human living environment inherently possesses biomoral character.

I-2. Humansphere-sustainable development

Our G-COE project aims to establish global area studies for humansphere-sustainable development. In Initiative 4, we take a bottom-up perspective, focusing on local and regional particularities in their interaction with global influences and issues, such as economic liberalization, democratization, climate concerns, war and conflicts, health and old age, poverty and hunger, natural calamity etc.

The study of cultural perceptions of the socio-ecological environment and their intellectual underpinnings offer insights into the relevance—and limits—of contemporary science and technology as well as capitalist liberal democracy to local life. This would help direct our options for building locally sustainable humansphere.

For me, humansphere-sustainable development means overall progress of human well-being that involves healthy and meaningful relationships with/in the socio-ecological environment. What constitutes ‘overall progress of human well-being’ and ‘healthy and meaningful relationships with/in environment’ is a matter of debate that requires further elaboration and research. One of the aims of our G-COE project lies precisely in defining what constitutes humansphere-sustainable development.

The paradigm of ‘humansphere-sustainable development’ aims to go beyond the framework of ‘sustainable human development’. The latter tacitly presupposes conflict between satisfying human needs and enhancing capability on the one hand, and sustaining our environment on the other. The focus in that case is on the balance between the two, in other words, between economy and ecology. It is my contention, however, that we should shift this kind of perspective and begin to look for ways in which the construction of healthy and meaningful relationships with our environment can be positively related to enhancement of our overall well-being.

We need to discover an ‘environment-inspired’ way of life that includes cultural values and practices, institutions and technology. Instead of trying to manage a balance between economy and ecology, our approach considers human life as interaction and exchange with the socio-ecological environment. So our focus is one,

namely the humansphere. As our everyday experience tells us, quality of life is dependent, not on the quantity of how much we gain from the environment, but on the quality of relationships with environment, that is, our interaction with other animate and inanimate beings. This shift in perspective can only occur when we begin to see the 'human-environment' as one unit of human life and endeavor to enhance the quality of the networks constituting this unit as a whole, instead of treating human and nature as separate entities with conflicting interests. It is my contention that our humansphere-perspective will enable us to do this.

In order to understand the humansphere as an integrated topos of human life, we need to reassemble our views and knowledges on the socio-religious, the politico-economic and the bio-physical aspects of human life. The socio-religious is often taken to be human-made and subjectively and arbitrarily constructed as relativistic 'culture' or 'belief', while the politico-economic is seen as induced from the global 'system' and 'institution', and the bio-physical as determined by universal and objective 'laws' of nature. However, when we view human life as socio-ecological interaction and exchange with the humansphere environment, and attempt to envision enhancement of its overall quality, we begin to see all these three aspects in an integral manner. Surely, our intellectual challenge today is precisely to develop this kind of integrated vision.

I-3. Humansphere and Global Issues

Humansphere-sustainable development is a global issue today because there is a threat of breakdown of the socio-ecological system. By system, I mean a complex whole that maintains dynamic equilibrium through interaction of interrelated elements. We can no longer take nature for granted, since the humansphere as socio-ecological environment is in danger largely due to human activities. We must begin to conceptualize the humansphere as dialogically constituted in the interaction between nature, culture and human agency.

There is an urgent need to understand the present socio-ecological transformations in an integrated manner. Phenomena such as 'globalization', 'democratization', 'fundamentalism', 'new social movements', 'environmental issues' etc. are all interconnected. In order to understand this, the perspective of global area studies on the humansphere is required.

A major question arises in this regard: What kind of structural change to what extent is required in the present capitalist liberal-democracy for humansphere-sustainable development? My tentative answer is that we should avoid either simply denying or celebrating capitalism and/or liberal-democracy and

instead—at least at this stage—carefully look at how they are changing their character in the present day, as more plural actors and issues—the global South, subaltern, community, environment etc.—play significant roles in the system, beyond the liberal democratic assumption of the ‘individual’ as sovereign subject. Especially noteworthy is the transformation from below in various parts of the world that seek to localize and vernacularize newly introduced values, institutions and technologies. These can be seen as a part of human efforts to reassemble knowledges to accommodate new elements to local conditions.

I am by no means suggesting that there is a single answer to the question of what kind of structural change is necessary for capitalist liberal-democracy. There must be different answers in different areas and fields reflecting the particular socio-ecological conditions. At the same time, nevertheless, there must be global coordination to deal with globally shared issues. The new paradigm of sustainable humansphere based on global area studies demands us to be sensitive towards both local and regional particularities and common global future.

We find both resilient and transformative aspects of capitalist liberal-democracy in the interface of the global and the local. Our endeavor, in Initiative 4, is to pay attention to human agency in situ which works to reassemble knowledges and to reorganize biomoral relationships. In the course of this process, we hope to discern the potentialities for humansphere-sustainable development.

II. Biomoral Humansphere in Rural Orissa, India

II-1. Fluidity of body-person in India

Let me now give you an example of such process of reassembling of knowledges and reorganizing of biomoral relationships from my field in Orissa, India. My present example mainly deals with social and politico-economic aspects, but in future I plan to extend my research to environmental aspects.

In the experience of life process in rural Orissa, India, there is a sense of biomoral connectivity between human bodies, food, land, ancestral spirits and deities. We find a series of exchanges that mutually construct and influence both the bio-material and socio-moral substances of these entities. As Bayly argues, the core of such ideas is that ‘the human mind, the human body, the city and the polity were all composite and complementary organizations of biomoral substance’ (Bayly 1998: 15).

I suggest that instead of treating this sense of connectivity in terms of mere ‘belief’, we should consider such embodied sense of flow of life as ‘cultural

resources' that has the potentiality of playing a significant role in building a humanosphere-sustainable development. Let me stress that what I am trying to do here is not to celebrate some kind of environment-friendly 'symbiotic' local traditional culture. I want to show how the cultural resources, together with the working of human agency, can not only mediate themselves with global values and institutions, such as democracy, but also provide new universal implications, while retaining their locally viable character.

Now, regarding personhood in South Asia, it has been correctly pointed out by 'ethnological' studies (Marriott & Inden 1977; Marriott 1990) that persons are not conceptualized as 'bounded units' (Marriott 1976: 111). In understanding personhood and identity in India, it is necessary to look at how humoral and fluid 'biomoral' (Bayly 1998) interactions involving exchange of 'code-substance' (Marriott 1976)—materials that carry cultural meanings and values—constituted and determined the position and identity of a body-person (Barnett 1976; Marriott & Inden 1977; Daniel 1984; Fruzzetti & Östor 1984; Fruzzetti, Östor & Barnett 1992).¹

According to this biomoral definition of identity of a body-person, interactions between land, food and human bodies—the congregate of which makes up the basic network of economics and society—are particularly important. A body-person is constructed from the corporeal code-substance made through marital match and food that is ingested. Since the food is produced on a piece of land, the moral-nature of that particular earth substance is taken into the body-person. Socio-political position, titles and ritual privileges granted to a person also constitutes his personhood, as they carry certain code-substances too. Similarly, actions influence a body-person since they involve inter-exchange of biomoral substance. Here, the agents and patients are implicated in complex ways through causal nexus (Strathern 1988).

In this regard, gift exchanges are extremely important in determining personhood since the moral-nature of the giver is contained in the gift—women, food, land and other ritual-economic resources—and influences the personhood of the receiver. Anthropological studies of India in the 1960s and 1970s have described in detail the kind of care and attention paid by Indian people regarding from whom to accept water, food and women. These matters are related to concerns about maintaining their 'proper' body-personhood, and previous studies considered them to represent the

¹ The term 'body-person' is used here to indicate how the body as corporeal substance and personhood as social role and position are inseparable. This is because biomoral exchanges form a body in a given social network and the kind of code-substance that constitutes the body carries socio-cultural meanings and values.

norms of Indian society (Mayer 1960; Parry 1979). But I would argue that we can also see this phenomenon the other way around. That is to say, instead of starting with the existence of a 'society' where there are norms prescribing exchanges, we can see how the politico-cultural acts of exchange determine the relationships, or 'sociality' (Strathern 1988: 13; Ingold 1989: 221; Shotter 1993: 61), between various body-persons and their relationships with the environment. In other words, it is the aggregate of these biomoral exchanges that forms a body-person and their networks which make up the society and polity. A body-person can be seen as a knot in the overlapping and multi-layered networks of exchanges that constitute group and territorial formations. Let me present further details of these conceptions and practices.

II-2. Formation of body

According to a common folk discourse in Orissa (and in India in general), a human body is formed when the man's seminal fluid (*birja*) mixes with the woman's sexual secretion (*raja*) during intercourse. Sperm is said to make the bones and the female sexual fluid the flesh.

The bones of ancestors in turn, in their association with sperm (*birja* also means seed), are believed to be a source of fertility and represent the continuity of the household. After cremation, the bones of married adults are placed inside a hole on the wall of the house facing the backyard and plastered over with mud. This place is worshipped on every full moon, new moon and *saṃkranti*² days for the welfare and prosperity of the family. Their conceptual and symbolic association with the abundance of crops is obvious. Pictures of rice plants and rice mounds are drawn on the walls of houses during the harvest festival of Lakṣmī *pūjā*, worship of the goddess of fortune. The ancestors' bones are eventually taken to the Ganga in Gaya and immersed in the final funeral ritual (van der Veer 1988). One villager explained to me that the bones evaporate and go up to the sky with water, fall on to the ground as rain, become rice grain, are eaten by the descendents, become sperm again and reproduce more descendents.³ Right from conception to death and subsequent incorporation as

² A day on which the sun enters the next zodiac.

³ In a faint resonance, *Manu Smṛti* (Laws of Manu) III-76 states, 'An oblation duly thrown into the fire, reaches the sun; from the sun comes rain, from rain food, there from the living creatures (derive their subsistence)'. Also *Bhagavad Gītā* III-14 says, 'From food come forth beings; from rain food is produced; from sacrifice arises rain, and sacrifice is born of action'. Upon this classical notion of cyclic (continued to the next page)

an ancestor, a person is involved in interactions and exchanges of code-substances which embed him/her in the society and cosmos.

While the man's sperm is referred to as the 'seed', the woman's womb is called the 'field' (Fruzzetti & Östor 1984; Fruzzetti, Östor & Barnett 1992). It is not only the seed that determines the character of the body, since seeds grow in biomoral exchange with the field.⁴ It is considered important that the male seed is planted and nurtured on a 'proper' female field for it to grow into a body that matches the lineage and caste.⁵ It is explained that this is why proper marriage alliance is important.

II-3. Nurturing of the body through 'eating' land

Ideotypically, a body born as a result of a suitable marriage alliance is then fed and maintained by the rice which is produced on a particular piece of land that has been ascribed to the family, and passed down over the generations. The body requires 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 line of family or lineage (*baṃśa*) in Orissa is continued patrilineally. The continuity of a lineage is considered important not only for the reproduction of the family so that someone can take care of the family duty and property, but also to feed and sustain the ancestors, who in turn grant protection and prosperity to descendants.

'sacrifice' are added folk beliefs regarding the cycle of ancestors and descendents.

⁴ This is not only in relation to human reproduction. The same kind of discourse can be found in relation to agricultural production (Daniel 1984; Gupta 1998).

⁵ A soul (*jivātma*) befitting the vessel is said to enter the gross body during pregnancy. 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 Orissa is that which is conducted between families that 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 group or *jāti*. Under the precolonial system of entitlements, *bandhus* had held similar entitlements and the kinship rank of a family more or less matched the kind of office it held. Although this is not the case today and there is increasing gap between socio-economic position and traditional status, there is still the notion that marriage alliance should be made between people with equal status. The idea that there should be a match between a person and land allocated by the system of entitlements can be seen clearly in the notions regarding how a body is nurtured by the products of the land.

The proper land suiting the lineage and family *par excellence* is the ‘service land’ (*hetā*, jagir), which is said to have been granted by the king in lieu of the service they offer to the community and the state. A man is said to ‘eat the land’ (*jami khāibā*) when he holds a service land. Intake of food produced on the land is one of the most important ways in which code-substances affect the body constitution of a person.⁶ Land (or more precisely the right to a share of land products) was allocated as a part of patrimonial rights in the precolonial ‘system of entitlements’ (Tanabe 2005) which allotted duties and rights and thus defined the socio-political structure of local communities in Khurda. So, it is natural that in order for a person to occupy a certain office and thus the allotted land, it is considered necessary for him to have the proper body-personhood to suit the office. In other words, there is an idea that a person should live on and ‘eat’ the land which is suited to his body-personhood.⁷ Just as it is important for the seed to match the earth, the sperm the womb and the food the body, it is important that the body matches the family with its prescribed entitlements to land and office.⁸

⁶ The biomoral substance of the one who cooks also affects the eater. So care is taken regarding ‘from whose hand one eats’ (*kāhāra hātaru khāiba*).

⁷ Although today there are relatively few families which still hold service land attached to their traditional office or connected to their family history, the idea that it is proper for a person to eat the fruits of his/her own land is still ritually important. For instance, during the harvest festival of *māṇa basā* or *Lakṣmī pūjā*, which celebrates the harvest in the month of Mārgaśīra (November-December), it is considered important that paddy harvested from the family land is used for worship. Those who have migrated to towns often have paddy harvested from their family land in the village sent to their house in the town to celebrate the occasion.

⁸ The question ‘Does that person suit the land?’ (*Se loka se jamiku sohiba ki?*) arises especially in the case of an adoption when a person is brought from outside to inherit the office. Let me give an example here for illustration. The Chief of Garh Manitri today was adopted by the family from an affinal relative, after the original Chief immigrated to England. His elder brother was brought first but returned to his natal house as he was said to have not ‘matched’ the Chief’s family’s land and caught leprosy. Leprosy is considered in folk belief to represent a manifestation of ‘sin’ (*pāpa*). This person was considered to have been affected by the disease because he transgressed *dharma* by accepting an office that was beyond his capacity. The present Chief was then brought but also caught leprosy. It is said, however, that he was cured after he prayed to Rāmacaṇḍī—the tutelary goddess of the region who also represent the earth of the locality—so that he may be accepted. He remains in the office till today.

II-4. Annual rituals and the cycle of agricultural and social reproduction

The cycle of rice production and its consumption is closely connected with both the seasonal cycle of nature and annual rituals. The rituals related to production and consumption of rice in turn are connected to the relationships of kinship and caste, which are considered 'traditional', since rituals are the time when collective actions and exchanges are performed through kinship and caste. Thus the cycle of yearly rituals matching together with the cycle of production and consumption of rice is very much related to the enactment and reproduction of relationships of family, kinship and caste all of which are seen as part of traditional concepts and practices. Since the seasonal rituals practically and aesthetically go with the cycle of nature, they are easily 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 was intimately related with the cycle of nature, is that the community and its members were able to maintain a sense of the 'sacred' in its contact with nature in the process of reproduction. It is considered necessary to receive *śakti* or the sacred generative power from the earth for the production of food. The agricultural process is accompanied by various rites which ensure the proper transformation of *śakti* (Tanabe 1999b). The earth goddess and manifestations of the generative power in the form of goddesses are worshipped, and gods are also invoked to grant protection, in the annual religious festivals that are related to the agricultural cycle. Thus there is a feeling of biomoral connection between men, deities and nature.

An account is presented in Table 1 of the social and agricultural reproductive cycle in the indigenous calendar based on related rituals.⁹

Table 1 Annual rituals and agricultural cycle

⁹ Also see Das and Mahapatra (1979: 85-102) and Mohanty (1997). My data is from Garh Manitri, Khurda. The contents of rituals change from region to region even within Orissa.

Name of occasion	Time in the year	Ritual or agricultural activities
<i>Doḷa pūrṇimā</i>	End of lunar month of Phālguna (February - March)	Procession of village deities. Reading of new calendar in front of deities and villagers. Earth is worshipped. The preparatory first two plows would have been finished by then. The end of the lunar year and start of the new year. All payment to clients and laborers must finish before this date.
<i>Holi</i>	Day after <i>doḷa pūrṇimā</i> ; first day of the lunar new year	People play with colored powder and paints. Spring festival to celebrate the coming of the new reproductive cycle.
<i>Paṇā saṃkrānti</i>	First day of the solar month of Baiśākha (April - May)	Mother earth, hot and dry in this season, is cooled down and made 'wet' by offering <i>paṇā</i> (a cooling drink). Marks the beginning of the solar year. Start of summer season.
<i>Daṇḍa jātrā</i>	Same day as <i>paṇā saṃkrānti</i>	Devotees stay in 'wish house' (<i>kāmanā ghara</i>) together and go through penances of rolling on hot sand, etc. (see Chapter 6 for details).
<i>Akṣaya tṛīyā</i>	Third day of the bright fortnight of Baiśākha (April - May)	Paddy seeds are ritually sown on the 'field of auspicious beginning' (<i>anukūla kiāri</i>) by the head of household. The earth is worshipped as a goddess. Paddy seeds sown on this date are said to give good harvest.
<i>raja</i>	Starts from the last day of the solar month of Jyeṣṭha (June - July) for four days	Festival for girls and young women. Earth is not plowed during this time in order not to inflict any pain on Mother Earth who is in menstruation. The final preparatory plowing is finished just before the occasion. After this festival, cultivators choose an auspicious day to start proper sowing.
<i>Snāna purn̄nima</i>	Full moon day of Jyeṣṭha month (June - July)	Trinity of Ṛṣiya Deva are bathed on 'bathing platform' (<i>snāna maṇḍapa</i>). The land is plowed when the paddy plants grow to about fifteen to twenty centimeters. Some days later it is flattened again and this is repeated after about ten days. The ritual marks the beginning of monsoon season. Rain is expected to fall on this day.
<i>Chitālāgi amābāsyā</i>	New moon day of Śrābaṇa month (July - August)	Special cake called <i>chitau piṭhā</i> is offered to the earth goddess in the paddy field. Paddy field is weeded around this time. Paddy plants are spaced evenly. The ritual is for abundant crops and protection against snails.
<i>Pāṇi bodā baḷi</i>	Sunday or Tuesday before the full moon of Śrābaṇa month	'Water sheep sacrifice' offered to Goddess Rāmacaṇḍī praying for good rain. Medium is possessed by the goddess. Khondha priest performs <i>pūjā</i> . Brāhmaṇa performs <i>homa</i> .
<i>Gahmā purn̄nima</i>	Full moon day of the month of Śrābaṇa	Cows are worshipped as 'go mātā' (cow mother) or 'go Lakṣmī' (Goddess Lakṣmī in the form of cow). Also the birthday of Balarāma (another name is Haḷadhara, meaning the plow-holder).
Goddess Rāmacaṇḍī festival	Seventh day of the bright fortnight of Āświna month (September - October)	Generative power of the goddess Rāmacaṇḍī enters the village in the form of the medium and water pots. The water filled with the goddess's generative power spreads in the paddy field. The grandest community festival where all the castes in the region perform certain roles. (See Chapter 6 for details.)

Name of occasion	Time in the year	Ritual or agricultural activities
<i>Garbhaṇā saṃkrānti</i>	First day of the solar month of Kārttika (October - November)	'Pregnant <i>saṃkrānti</i> '. Sweet rice porridge (<i>jāu</i>) is cooked in the paddy fields to be offered to goddess Lakṣmī, represented by the paddy 'pregnant' with new grain.
<i>Māṇa osā</i>	Every Thursday in the lunar month of Mārgaśīra (November - December)	Time of rice harvest. Lakṣmī represented by newly harvested rice put in a measuring basket (<i>māṇa</i>) is worshipped with varieties of cakes and other delicacies. (See Plate 16)
<i>Kṣetrā pāla pūjā</i>	Tuesday or Saturday of Māgha month (January - February)	After the harvest, a few bunches in the 'field of auspicious beginning' is deliberately left and made into a knot. This bunch, called the 'provider in the field' (<i>kṣetrā pāla</i>), is worshipped as a goddess (See Plate 17). The paddy from the <i>kṣetrā pāla</i> will be used for the ritual sowing on <i>akṣaya tṛtīyā</i> .
<i>Bāri śītalā</i>	Takes place after threshing	The earth is consoled after the threshing of paddy on it is over and cooled down with offerings. Threshing is done in the back yard by an oxen tied to a pole stamping on paddy plants. This pole is also offered worship.
<i>Agniḥajā pūrṇimā</i>	Last day of the lunar month of Māgha (January - February)	The 'fire burning full moon'. Bundle of straws together with vegetables are burnt in the 'field of fire burning' (<i>agniḥajā pariā</i>). After the fire consumes the straw, people enjoy eating the baked vegetables as <i>prasāda</i> . After this, the fire is said to be satisfied and will not bring calamity to the village. The ritual also anticipates the coming hot weather.

Source: Field research in 1992 by Tanabe.

Note: These are examples are from Garh Manitri. There are variations in the contents of rituals and festivals in different areas.

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 Lakṣmī, an aspect of the mother goddess representing prosperity and auspiciousness. This process is marked with rituals that bring interactions among gods, nature and people, which define and confirm the role and position of each individual and family in the social network of kinship and caste.

It is through correct performance of these rituals and timely agricultural activities that 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.

II-5. Sacrificial Ethics and the Postcolonial Condition

The order of the body, society and nature is believed to be maintained when a body born from a union between man and woman who match each other, live on the proper land, eat the proper food and do the prescribed duty as sacrifice in interaction with the people, gods and nature in accordance with the 'tradition' (*paramparā* which means both tradition and line of succession). Here, we find the idea that the balance of the whole is maintained by the service of each part whose position is separated in terms of food, sex, living space and work. This kind of biomoral sense is connected with sacrificial ethics in which a self offers service for the welfare of the whole. Through ritual processes, the seemingly harmonious and holistic world of 'traditional culture' is most prominently represented, enacted, reaffirmed, transformed and recreated.

However, it should be born in mind that the very fact that the traditional world can be described in a holistic manner is actually a result of the postcolonial condition. The dichotomy in India between the subsistence economy and socio-ritual activities on the one hand and the cash economy and state politics on the other derives from their colonial and postcolonial experience. In precolonial times, the relationships between the local community, market and the state were much more complex and open-ended (Tanabe 1999a). The dichotomy was colonially created when the local society and its agricultural economy were traditionalized and separated from the workings of the colonial government and the imperial economy, which functioned to extract wealth from the former (Tanabe 1998, 2006a). Even in the present postcolonial situation where there is no longer a colonial government and imperial economy outside to exploit the village economy, the dichotomy in the form of a contradiction and distinction between the modern politics and market economy on one hand, and moral agrarian community on the other hand remains real to the villagers. In order to better understand this postcolonial predicament, let us now turn to the situation regarding cash economy and factional politics.

III. From Factional Politics to Vernacular Democracy

III-1. Contradiction between Factional Politics and the Biomoral

Factions existed in Indian villages since the 1950s but they became more active and prominent with the development of populism in state politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Due to the spread of system of democratic elections, the power basis extended from the urban elites to the rural population. The government started to redistribute

resources directly to the rural population to gain support (Bardhan 1984; Nayyar 1998; Khilnani 1999). The state began to interfere in the processes of production and distribution of resources which were entrusted to society until then and also in people's lives in the name of guaranteeing life and welfare (Khilnani 1999: 41).¹⁰ This is an example of 'biopolitics' where the issue of life came to occupy the central issue of politics in the modern state (Foucault 1991).

Indian government especially from the 1970s conducted populist politics, distributing cash and kind in the name of food aid, fertilizer subsidies and poverty alleviation. Under this 'subsidy raj' (Bardhan 1984), people competed for acquirement of state resources, and political society at the village level became increasingly more active. Factions till the early 1990s were the most important form of political society that mediated the rural population and the state in the system where subsidies were granted in exchange for votes.

A faction normally consisted of a core of few oligarchic leaders and their supporters. There were typically two factional groups (Congress faction and anti-Congress faction in most cases) formed within the dominant caste of the village and these competed for support by other castes. Faction members supporting the ruling party at the state or national level could expect to get priority distribution of resources such as seeds, fertilizers, rice and cash from poverty alleviation programs, as well as preferential treatment in construction contracts, educational and employment opportunities, and pensions.

Embezzlement and bribery were common occurrences in factional politics for maximizing distribution of resources to one's own group. The two factions were always in conflict in local society and there were constant disputes and fighting. In this situation, the low castes, who were excluded from the process of distribution of state resources, became highly critical of political corruption by the 1980s. Even the dominant castes who actively participated in factional politics often expressed their deep regret over the violent conflicts between factions.

Village and factional unity are expressed in biomoral idioms of brotherhood and kinship. But political activities which aim to maximize self-gain and biomoral values inevitably contradict. Strong emotions including feelings of expectation and betrayal, hatred and violence result due to this contradiction. For example, in Garh Manitri in

¹⁰ An extreme example of this was the compulsory sterilization program which was conducted for a period of 21 months from 1975 when civil rights were temporary suspended during the 'state of emergency'. The state attempted to lower the birth rate as a poverty alleviation policy and made vasectomy compulsory for the fathers of families with over two children.

1991, there were repeated arguments that ended up in incidents of violence among the faction members supporting the ruling party incident over distribution of resources such as who would be ward members, and who will get the contract for construction work. These kinds of incidents have been reported all over India.

In the village, dominant caste members constituting a faction are often related by blood or locality and there is gift giving between each other on a daily basis. Good relationships (*bhala samparka*) in the village are thought to be constituted by giving and taking (*diā niā*), coming and going between houses (*jibā āsibā*), talking to each other (*kathābārttā karibā*), helping out in times of need (*sāhājya karibā*). For example, on occasions of marriage, birth, and first menstruation, women conduct rituals and distribute gifts to neighboring households (Tokita-Tanabe 1996). Sweets and cakes sent from the woman's natal house (in the case of ritual of first menstruation, the natal house of the mother of the girl who has started menstruating for the first time), distributed to the neighboring households and eaten. This kind of interaction and gift exchange accompanies the exchange of code-substance constituting the body-person, and constitutes people as agents in a network of biomoral practices.

The morality of sharing among brothers in the socio-ritual field was also the ideological discourse used in faction formation. Factional members were promised to be given equal shares as brothers. However, in reality it was a small number of oligarchic leaders who actually decide how and whom to distribute the resources. In order to acquire state resources, it was necessary to negotiate with administrators and politicians outside the village and since practical knowledge regarding such negotiations was limited to leaders, the leaders' say inevitably increased. Resources ended up being unequally distributed according to the power structure within the faction, and this contradicted the ideology of equal sharing among brothers. Under such circumstances, the villagers became constantly suspicious about who was friendly with whom and what kind of position they hold within the faction. The gift exchange between households was used as a measure to discern who were friendly with whom in this micropolitics (Tokita-Tanabe 1996). When they sensed that they were not given their due share of resources within the faction and felt betrayed by the brothers, they expressed resentment and often rebelled. Thus the conflicts and violence went on.

How should such factional politics be evaluated from the point of view of democracy? Factional politics in the village was a response by the people to become political subjects in context of the populist penetration of state biopower. It can be said that it contributed to the downward spread of democracy in the sense that it included village people (at least the dominant castes) into political processes.

From a macroscopic viewpoint, it is certainly significant that the non-elite peasants participated in political society in Indian politics. In policy decisions the government must now consider the opinions of not only the urban elites but also the rural peasants who constitute the majority from the point of view of numbers. This is a positive change brought about by political society. However, from a microscopic viewpoint, the development of factional politics in local society led to majoritarian rule by the dominant castes and excluded low castes from political processes. This contributed to the reproduction of the postcolonial structure of hierarchy and domination.

Another problem is that even though the opportunities for gaining state resources in rural society increased due to the development of factional politics, at least for the dominant castes, their transformation into agents in politics does not make it possible for even them to live in a way which they consider of value. As long as politics of demand through factional politics is about the maximization of self gain, it will remain contradictory with biomoral sense of life in society. Factional politics resulted in bringing about hatred and violence and was a sphere which the participants themselves talked about with disgust. At the basis of this was the postcolonial disjunction between the socio-ritual sphere which was the basis of biomoral identity of the people and the politico-economic sphere which is a site of competitive acquiring of resources in response to the penetration of the state biopower.

III-2. Moral Society and Politics of Relationships

In the course of growth of the state and political society in the 1970s and 1980s, although the state's responsibility, power and finances expanded there was no development in its governability, as dysfunction and corruption became widespread. People became increasingly dissatisfied and the Indian state faced a crisis of legitimacy not in the sense of failure of democratic procedures but in the sense of not being able to fulfill its responsibility in biopolitics of guaranteeing life to its people (Juan 1978; Kaviraj 1984; Kohli 1990; Mohapatra 1997; Tanabe 2006b). Also, the increase in the state budget led to a financial crisis. In this situation, at the beginning of the 1990s, India steered its state administration towards the direction of economic liberalization and devolution of power to local self-governing bodies.

Today in the age of neoliberalism, as there is a general trend of the 'retreat of the state' (Strange 1996) where the state is transferring power (or responsibility) to society, the sociological/anthropological question of how society can offer a livable space where people can pursue their singular values in shared relationships is re-emerging as important political agenda. In this context, 'politics of relationships' is increasing its

importance as a third form of democracy which differs from both ‘politics of liberation’ in civil society and ‘politics of demand’ in political society. Whereas the politics of liberation aims to free individuals from the shackles of community, the politics of relationships does not deny that the self is constituted and embedded in relationships but aims to transform the relationships themselves in order to secure capability and dignity of the self thereof. Since the self only exists in connection with others, politics of relationships cannot just aim for self expansion as in the case of politics of demand. In the politics of relationships, the existence of the other is always presupposed and the normative appropriateness of one’s actions in the relationships is constantly examined. In other words, this is a sphere in which ethico-political negotiations and contestations take place regarding the ‘images of community’ (Li 1996). Here I call this sphere of politics of relationships ‘moral society’ in contradistinction to civil society and political society. This is a site where biomorality becomes an issue in social negotiations over what constitutes good relationships, in which cultural politics over both symbolic meaning and material implication take place.¹¹

In the context of expansion of space for self-governing of local societies in India from the 1990s, the issue has become how to guarantee the lives of all people by political distribution of resources and at the same time how to secure voice and dignity for all in socio-political interrelationships. In other words, the agenda has become how to mediate and integrate the agenda of biopolitics in the political sphere and that of biomorality in the socio-ritual sphere. It can be said that ‘biomoral politics’ has become the major issue in the politics of relationships.

The agenda for postcolonial India society can be said to be guaranteeing rights for survival to all individuals and groups and at the same time turning everyday life into a site where biomoral values which had provided meaning to singular lives can be practiced. It is necessary that the biomoral provides basis for values not only in the socio-political sphere but also in the larger politico-economic sphere in order to overcome the postcolonial disjunction in the life world. However, if the content of the biomoral legitimizes the structure of hierarchy and dominance traditionalized under colonialism, it will only be a conservative ideology that legitimizes preexisting power structure in local society. What is necessary is a biomorality which enables the application of agency of each member of local society and their democratic cooperation. The question is: What form would this take and how would it be constructed?

¹¹ On the simultaneity of symbolic and material struggles, see Berry (1988) and Moore (1998).

III-3. Sacrificial principle and the Biomoral in Indian society

In previous theories on Indian society, emphasis was often placed on the structure of hierarchy and domination in caste relationships. However, it should be noted that this is a structure which was ‘traditionalized’ in colonial times. Hierarchy and domination remained hegemonic structures in postcolonial Indian society. But it is my contention that there is another important value which has been discussed in Indian philosophy but has not been paid much attention to in anthropological studies. This is the value of ontological equality. It is a value which accepts that there are differences in roles and positions in the world at the phenomenal level but everything is one and equal at the ontological level. From this point of view, everything is equal in terms of their life as living entities. Ontological equality can be said to constitute the basis of intercaste cooperation and ecological living in India according to the principle of sacrifice, and supports consideration and respect for the lives of others in the biomoral world.

In Indian society, the principle of sacrificial cooperation that each performs his/her duty and role for the whole was based on caste division of labor. This was supported not only by hierarchy and domination but also ontological equality. One villager explained to me about the difference between caste roles and equality between people as living beings. ‘We are all children of the mother goddess. What is difference in caste in front of the mother? Anyone can approach gods and goddesses to ask for their prayers (wishes) to be granted regardless of caste or economic status. Everyone needs food, clothes and shelter; all families need children. These things do not differ even if caste differs. However, if such prayers are granted, the duty of each person in society is different and this is determined by caste.’ In other words, basic needs as living beings are the same, and only when these are fulfilled is social cooperation based on respective roles possible.

The value of ontological equality offers the subalterns a basis of criticism and resistance when the structure of hierarchy and domination threatens the subaltern social principle of respect for all living beings. This can be seen in actual historical processes in postcolonial India. In Garh Manitri in the 1960s, so-called service castes attempted to transform jajmani relationships formed under colonialism (Tanabe 2002, 2006c). Each service caste united as caste association to negotiate with the dominant caste over the revision of customary exchange relations. The barber caste demanded that the annual amount of paddy they receive for their services to the patron households should be increased from the amount fixed by custom in accordance with the market prices of the services and goods they provide. The potter caste succeeded

in getting cash payment according to the market rate for each piece of work. The carpenters managed to get the patron households to pay wages per day of work. Service castes continue to negotiate the prices of their services and goods today. In such negotiations, they often ask 'How are we to eat (live) otherwise?' This can be understood as attempts at asking for consideration and respect for life in response to changing conditions rather than just seeking the introduction of market principles.

Such resistance from the low castes did not imply that they discarded their caste identity per se. Caste division of labor was maintained in various rituals which practice and reconfirm the principle of sacrificial cooperation of caste in local society. However, even in this sphere, the low castes tried to rearrange the content of ritual roles to enhance their dignity. For instance, the cowherd caste in Garh Manitri refused to carry the palanquins of grooms in marriages of high castes in the 1970s. The high castes demanded that the cowherds should fulfill their traditional role, but the latter argued that their true traditional role was to carry the palanquins of gods in rituals and they were forced later on to carry the palanquins of human beings. Schedule caste ('untouchable') Haris (sweeper/drummer caste) had the role of sweeping the village before a community festival, but they intentionally began to neglect this work. However, they eagerly performed their role of drumming when the goddess gets possessed. These are examples of redefinition of tradition from below (Tanabe 2002, 2006c).

For the low castes, tradition which guarantees their identity is not the hegemonic structure of hierarchy and dominance traditionalized during colonial times. It is rather the sacrificial principle of ontological equality in which the equal and indispensable parts having different roles cooperate and serve the whole. It is according to this vision that the low caste tried to reconstruct their traditional roles and social relationships. Here we can see a politics of relationships over the images of community.

III-4. Vernacular Democracy and Local Self Government

During the period between the 1960s and 1980s, the politics of relationships were limited mainly to the socio-ritual sphere. The political sphere was ruled by majoritarian factional politics centered on the dominant caste. However, in the 1990s, the subaltern attempts at redefinition of social relationships began to be extended to the political sphere. By the beginning the 1990s, low castes openly voiced their criticisms of factional politics and demanded equal participation in local politics. This was given momentum by institutional changes in the local self government reforms in 1992.

According to the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India in 1992, Scheduled Castes (S.C.), Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) and Other Backward Castes (O.B.C.) were given reservation according to their population ratio and women were granted reservation for one third of seats in each level of local government in the village. There was also large scale devolution of power from the central government and state government to the local self governing bodies regarding poverty alleviation policies and development projects. Institutions of hamlet meeting (*palli sabhā*) and village meeting (*grama sabhā*) were established to discuss and decide the policies of the local self governing bodies in which the people could participate directly. Due to the introduction of such institutions of local self government, the role of factions in securing budgets from the government decreased and the local self government came to have actual political decision making powers. In particular, the local self government at the village level—the gram panchayat—was granted a large budget and decision making powers regarding finance.

A local community consisting of several villages constituted the basic unit of system of entitlements and caste-wise division of labor in medieval and early modern Orissa (Tanabe 2005). Local community of a similar scale was given institutional backing as a unit of local self government in independent India. Since the 1990s, as the power of autonomy of gram panchayat increased, the importance of local society (local self governing body) as a political unit increased.

Due to the devolution of power to local self governing bodies, the two issues hitherto separated into two spheres, namely the biopolitical issue of guaranteeing life to all people and the biomoral issue of respecting the singular life of the self and the other in interactive relationships in society, were connected in the self government of local society. Here it can be said that the site of democracy in local society in India shifted from political society centered on the politics of demand to moral society centered on politics of relationships. The politics of relationships is no longer remained just a matter of socio-ritual relations but also became central in political relationships. Moral society is a sphere where people try to construct ideal relationships in which the singular existence of the self and the other can be mutually enhanced through consideration and respect for life of others which is connected with the self. However, what the ideal relationships should be is contested in political debates and conflicts (Mouffe 1993). Reservations and direct participation were given the role of guaranteeing social political agency to low castes and women in public institutions. Local society (local self governing body) was reconstructed as a place where political negotiations over the definition of biomorality were possible.

The democratization of local politics in India did not imply that autonomous

individuals with free will became the subjects of public politics as presupposed by the politics of liberation. Low castes and women are able to participate in the local political processes due to representational rights based on differences in reservation policies. In cases where there are SC, ST, OBC populations in a ward, there would be reservations according to population ratio in ward member elections at least once every few elections where SC, ST OBC members would be chosen. For example in Garh Manitri Gram Panchayat, the caste wise representation in the 1984 ward member elections was general (70%), OBC (15%), ST (10%), SC (5%), whereas by 1997 it was general (42%), OBC (25%), ST (25%), SC (8%). It still remains the case that the dominant caste which has the largest population ratio has political advantages, but the ratios of SC, ST and OBC are rapidly increasing and there is no doubt that their right to speak in matters of local politics has increased. Signatures of all ward members are required for passing decisions of the Gram Panchayat, which has come to have large financial power. Hence the opinions of SC, ST and OBC ward members must be taken into account to some extent and attention must be paid so that resources are also distributed to their wards and households. Moreover, since 1992, one third of ward members are women. In spite of the fact that the women's actions are greatly influenced by their husbands and brothers, there is no doubt that women's political participation and right to speak in public sphere is gradually increasing. Low castes and women do not see differences in caste and gender which are employed as the basis of reservation as negative factors which should be annihilated in the course of development of democracy. Rather, they interpret them as foundations that provide fairer political rights and franchise to plural groups. Differences in caste and gender also provide the basis of their unique identity in biomoral relationships. What became the issue in the participation of plural actors including low castes and women in the process of local self government was how to construct ideal social political relationships which respect the uniqueness of plural groups and guarantee equal political rights at the same time.

One villager belonging to the Washerman caste (SC) told me as follows in an interview in 2000: 'You know there used to be so much factional politics in the village. The leaders were 'eating up' everything (state resources) for themselves. Everyone was acting only for personal interests. Khaṇḍāyata (dominant caste) people used to decide everything by themselves for their own benefit. That is not right. I do what I have to do as service (*sebā*). It is for the village that I do my duty (*kartabya*). Everyone should do their work correctly without self-interest (*niskāma*).' Doing one's work (Oriya: *kāma*, Sanskrit: *karma*) as service (*sebā*, *sevā*) or duty (*kartabya*, *kartavya*) is an expression one often comes across in India. This is also employed by

high castes to legitimize the structure of hierarchy and dominance. However, in this case, this man of Washerman caste had applied these idioms to democratic politics and indicated a framework for understanding democracy in the reformed local self government by linking it to the egalitarian logic of sacrificial cooperation.

The villagers often see equal political representation in terms of equal rights to shares (*bhāga*, 'quota') in the resources. They say that distribution of grants and allotment of budgets for development projects should be done 'according to quota'. One Saora man (ST, husband of a female ward member) explained the mechanism of distribution of the state resources in Gram Panchayat as follows in an interview in 2005: '(The government budget) is given ward-wise. Work comes to the wards one by one. In our hamlet, the work of road paving came in that manner. ...Everything is distributed according to "quota" (English word is used here). Large wards gain more according to their share. Everything is like that.' People's major concern in the new local self government is whether each group is getting its due share in the budget. This reminds us of the 'system of entitlements' in which resources are distributed according to traditional division of roles.

It seems that the low castes interpret equal representation of plural castes in political activities by connecting it to the 'ontology of caste' (Mitra 1994: 50) reinterpreted from the subalternate viewpoint. They employ terms related to traditional division of roles such as duty, service, and shares to emphasize equal rights in local politics. However, these terms do not support hierarchy and domination but rather emphasize equality among castes in political participation, contribution and resource distribution. Low castes who have newly joined local politics try to redefine the meaning of politics from the control of resources by power of numbers to the development of the whole through equal participation, service and cooperation of plural parts of society. Here democracy and intercaste cooperation are linked through mediation by the sacrificial principle of ontological equality. The sacrificial principle which has been supporting biomoral social integration in India is reconstructed from the perspective of ontological equality from below and presented as a new vision of politico-social relationships.

As Subrata Kumar Mitra points out, "Interpreting caste . . . leads to the larger issue of how to relate the ontology of jati and varna . . . to the moral basis of society and state in India" (Mitra 1994: 50). The villagers consider caste differences employed in the political representation scheme not as something negative to be annihilated through development of democracy but, rather, as the basis for providing fairer entitlement and enfranchisement for different groups. This interpretation of ontology of caste may provide a suggestion for "alternative designs for life based

upon the recognition of difference” (V. Das 1989: 46). Whereas the “quest for homogeneity and similarity—the premises for the idea of harmony in the modern world—ends up by treating society as a mere ‘collection’ of people,” Veena Das notes, “a creative transformation of some of the assumptions of the ideology of caste may, in fact, help us to deal with the aberrations of the modern state’ (V. Das 1989: 46, 51). I suggest here that egalitarian sacrificial ethics, presented by subalterns as a new vision of community, has the potential of functioning as the pivot between the ontology of caste and a moral basis of democracy in rural India that recognizes difference.

Transformation of local societies in India since the 1990s can be understood as the process of overcoming the hegemonic structure of hierarchy and dominance and the establishment of ‘vernacular democracy’ (Tanabe 2007) in which biomoral values and the idea of democracy is joined from the viewpoint of subaltern sacrificial principle of equality. By vernacular democracy, I refer to the creative application of vernacular frameworks and values---local cultural resources----relating to socio-political alliances in the sphere of democratic practices. Sacrificial principles represented by terms such as service, duty and shares, have been used as frameworks of socio-political alliance in local society in India and practiced over a long time in history. These have also functioned as biomoral frameworks that guarantee people’s survival and identity in local society. The low castes are trying to construct new socio-political relationships by shifting the meanings of these practices and mediating them with democracy.

V. Conclusion

India’s economic liberalization of 1991 and local government reforms of 1992 have facilitated major socio-political changes in rural Orissa today, leading to increased participation of hitherto marginalized lower caste, tribal and female population in the local political process. The redistribution of resources from the urban economy—linked to global capitalism—to local communities and their population is working as a way to maintain rural agrarian villages and their landscape as livable environment. In this process of redistribution of wealth linked to democratization, which function to ensure legitimate share and voice to the hitherto marginalized, what has become important is the ‘politics of relationships’, where the definition of biomorally desirable socio-political relationships has come to be cultural-politically negotiated and contested.

Sacrificial ethics is employed by the subalterns who reinterpret the ‘tradition’ of community principle, transforming it from that based on the colonially traditionalized

hegemonic values of dominance and hierarchy to that founded on the cooperation of ontologically equal parts. This may be seen as an attempt by the people to establish a vernacular democracy which connects reformulated biomoral values with democratic practice of equal participation.

This kind of currently occurring process of reconstruction of the humansphere can only be understood when we integrate studies of the socio-religious, the politico-economic and the ecological aspects. I have suggested in this paper that one integrating perspective—in the context of Orissa, India—is to pay attention to the cultural-politics of life involving reconstitution of biomoral relationships that spread across human and nature, the local and the global, and the seen and the unseen. Humansphere-sustainable development would be possible only when such reassembling of knowledges across all these spheres provide culturally meaningful, politico-economically effective and ecologically viable way of life.

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