What does Social Structure Mean to Communities in a Politically Charged Situation?

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Abstract: Of late, the concept of social structure has come under critical reassessment in view of significant transformation of anthropologically defined structural categories in the context of tribal society. My own research on the social structure of the Maring tribe of Manipur, a North East Indian State of India, during 1970-80s demands that the whole question of tribal social structure needs to be looked afresh. Not that the concept has become totally redundant in the present situation; it only underlines the fact that individuals no longer react mechanically to the structural positions held by them. They are now involved in a search for meaning, legitimacy and authenticity of expression of structural categories in the political field. Social structure now subsumes diversity rather than uniformity or total integrity at the tribal level. The ‘domain of social structure’ perceived in terms of the total range of relationships functional within the society is of little practical value. At best, it can serve as an ‘ideal model’ a particular group of people is in need of to project their identity in a plural situation. The dynamics of politics operative at the level of a tribal community takes into account its encounter with other polities, state and even beyond. The so-called ‘traditional societies’ like the Maring have attained or are in the process of attaining a multifaceted character, which is not always compatible with the social structure they represent.

Key words: Social structure, Structural order, Domain, Social communication, Culture, Polity and Politics, Model, Maring, Kinship and Kin group, Third Element, North East India.