

Middle Indian Kinship Systems A Critique of Georg Pfeffer's Interpretation

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Abstract. – The question of how the kinship systems of the tribes of middle India should be interpreted is examined with explicit reference to the work of Georg Pfeffer. It is argued that his hypotheses of the existence of four- and eight-line kinship terminologies in the region do not correspond to the evidence but reflect instead an excessive reliance on the dictates of structuralist theory. These terminologies are best seen as modified two-line prescriptive ones, broadly intermediate between those of south and north India. [*India, tribes, kinship, structuralism*]

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How should the kinship systems of tribal middle India be interpreted? Georg Pfeffer and myself have long been concerned, independently, with this question but have come up with very different answers. In this article, I wish to draw attention to these differences and to address them in the form of a critique of the rival interpretation.¹ They cannot be dismissed as theoretical, since both Pfeffer and myself share the same, basically structuralist approach to kinship drawn ultimately from Lévi-Strauss through such figures as Louis Dumont, Rodney Needham, and N. J. Allen. They are rather substantive, i.e., they concern the nature of the systems themselves, something which in this case ultimately reflects methodological issues such as the proper use of evidence, the coherence of different sets of data, and the consistency of logical reasoning.

First, however, a word as to our respective writings: For myself, the major work is my book (Parkin 1992a), supplemented by a group of articles (Parkin 1988a, 1990, forthcoming), all of which should be seen as partially superseding earlier work of a more provisional and tentative nature

(Parkin 1985, 1986, 1988b). Pfeffer's corpus consists first of his book "Status and Affinity" (1982a) which has been the subject of two scathing reviews (Fruzzetti 1984; Bouez 1985a), both of which see it basically as a boldly conceived design that goes seriously wrong in its execution. There are also a couple of related articles (Pfeffer 1982b, 1983), an article postulating the existence of dual organization in India (1982c), a paper on Santal totemism (1984a), and a comparative study of kinship in the south Asian area (1985a). Occasional references to Pfeffer's other writings will be made here, but I leave aside for detailed discussion his work on gods in Orissa (1987a) and the secondary funerals of the Gadaba (1984b), as well as that on Germanic kinship terminologies (Pfeffer 1985b, 1987b, 1987c; but cf. Parkin 1993b).

It would be surprising, of course, if there was no convergence between Pfeffer's work and my own, given the convergence in region, ethnic groups, topic, and theoretical approach. For the most part, however, this is limited to generalities – the significance of middle Indian kinship systems as intermediate between the better defined regions of north and south India (a point also made by Bouez 1985b: 153); the existence of otherwise prescriptive terminologies with separate affinal terms, both in middle India and, sporadically, elsewhere in south Asia; and the practice of dispersing alliances among several alliance groups. Conversely, we do not agree on the nature of the tribal systems themselves, and it follows from that that we do not agree either on how they may be related, whether logically or historically, to those of north and south India respectively, nor on what the transformational paths between these various systems might be. I should add that Pfeffer has one apparent advantage over myself – he has visited and travelled in the area extensively, whereas I

¹ In part, this paper takes further points that emerged from a previous exchange but which could not then be developed properly (see Parkin 1992b, Pfeffer 1993a, Parkin 1993a).