

Newcomers to the world of goods: consumption among the Muria Gonds

ALFRED GELL

The theme of this paper is consumption as a form of symbolic action. Consumption goods are more than mere packets of neutral "utility." They are objects made more or less desirable by the role they play in a symbolic system. I will develop this entirely uncontroversial proposition on the basis of my observations of consumption behavior among the Muria of the north-central part of Bastar district, Madhya Pradesh, India.

The Muria belong to the "tribal" (*adivasi*) category established by the constitution of India, and according to the official stereotype of such groups they ought to be mired in poverty and exploitation. The official stereotype is not wide of the mark so far as most of the *adivasi* population are concerned (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982), but conditions in north-central Bastar are exceptional, for here the Muria enjoy considerable material advantages by comparison with small peasants elsewhere in the subcontinent (see Hill 1983). I will try to explain how this has come about in due course.

Amid the modest prosperity, or at least security, now enjoyed by most of the Muria population in north-central Bastar, one or two families in each village have enriched themselves to a greater degree than most, and it is on the consumption behavior of such rich Muria families that I wish to focus particular attention. I believe that "rich" Muria are a relatively new phenomenon, dating back no more than fifty years or so, and that this may help explain why their consumption behavior, which is marked by an exaggerated conservatism, assumes the rather peculiar form it does.

From an ethnohistorical point of view, then, I am dealing with a case in which a traditional consumption ethos and mode of assigning goods to symbolic categories lags behind objective changes in production techniques, which has resulted in enhanced economic productivity. Among the Muria production adheres to the premises of one kind of economy, whereas consumption continues to be based on the premise of a quite different economy. The net effect of this lag

is that rich Muria accumulate wealth they dare not spend and would have no real idea how to spend had they the inclination.

To be possessed of conspicuous wealth, in this society, is to be in an unnatural condition, one that renders more problematic, not less, any contemplated act of consumption. The response of the rich Muria is to behave with what looks like excessive parsimony, but which is not really true miserliness of the Scrooge-Volpone variety. The true miser admits both the possibility and the desirability of self-indulgent consumption, thereby enhancing in his own eyes the virtue of his own restraint. Such behavior is egotistical and anti-social. Muria accumulation arises in a completely different way. The Muria consumption bottleneck reflects an intense sensitivity to social pressures, within the family, the village, and the wider society. Acts of conspicuous consumption not falling within the framework of traditionally sanctioned public feasting and display are seen as socially threatening, hubristic, and disruptive.

Consequently, the rich are obliged to consume as if they were poor, and as a result become still richer. The unintended consequence of a pattern of restraints on consumption geared to the maintenance of egalitarian norms has been the undermining of the economic basis for the traditional egalitarian ethos of Muria society. In the long run this may result in the emergence of clear economic stratification in what has been, historically, a homogeneous, clan-based society. A new category of rich peasants and quasi-entrepreneurs has come into existence in Muria villages, but this category has yet to define itself socially vis-à-vis the rest of Muria society, or to find an idiom for expressing its social and economic distinctiveness in the language of symbolic consumption. For these families the material symbols of wealth displayed by the better-off Bastar Hindus, and the middle-class officials in the towns, that is, non-*adivasi* of comparable income, are not acceptable symbols of status precisely because they are associated with non-Muria identity. I will provide detailed descriptions of two families facing this kind of consumption dilemma below.

Consumer goods and personal identity

Before turning to particular cases I would like to offer some remarks on the subject of consumption as a symbolic act. Douglas and Isherwood (1980) have devoted an interesting monograph to this subject, stressing the central importance of "consumption rituals" in the mediation of social life. This approach rests squarely on the accumulated

