

Exploration of Tribal Heritage through the study of select tribal festivals

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Introduction

Human civilization in its sophisticated form, traces its genesis from the naïve apparatus of society and culture developed by Palaeolithic men. From hunter gatherers, men began to live a settled life of agriculturists. However, there was a transitory phase in between the period of vagabondism and urban settlement which introduced the concept of tribalism. Tribal societies were constructed to support survival of human beings into a hostile world. It facilitated the convergence of different minds and varied perspectives guided by the monochrome vision of an elected tribal chief. Synonymous concepts of togetherness, unity and common leader blended the entire flock of humans living collectively into a culture. In due course of time these small societies developed its own way of living, eating, hunting and worshipping. Increase in population provided a larger canvas for such tribal societies to expand and get bifurcated into multiple branches, each having its own identity with major or minor variations.

Neolithic revolution restricted the spread of tribal societies and cradled the huge republics of sixteen Mahajanpadas. However, the capitalist societies of twentieth century proved detrimental for the cultural heritage of age old tribal societies. Political agenda of connecting the tribals with main stream population, cosmopolitan culture alluring the tribal youth, ruthless destruction of wildlife and forests by companies are some of the factors causing depletion of traditional values of tribal life. Nevertheless, a peep into the sober and chaste lives of tribal communities through the study of their festivals could help and motivate one to imagine a green world without the squalid hues of capitalism, where human beings can establish selfless communion with God. The present research work would focus on the select festivals celebrated by tribes inhabiting the Chhotanagpur plateau of Northern Indian. This study will focus on the four rituals, Sarhul, Kathori, Karam and Hariari, celebrated by the tribals with the motive to felicitate their priceless natural heritage.

SARHUL FESTIVAL:

Sarhul, a tribal festival eulogizing the significance of Sal trees, is the biggest annual spring festival of Chhotanagpur region. It can be perceived as a day of remembering the ancestors because on this auspicious day all the spirits are called together at the sacred grove. This propitiation is followed by the symbolic marriage ritual of the earth and the sky, which is performed by the village priest and his wife. It is believed by the members of the community that this spiritual marriage would ensure fertility of the land. There is a tradition associated with Sarhul in which each family of the village contributes some rice for the brewing of rice beer by the wife of Priest. This beer is used for the liberation of spirits. From the eve of the feast till its completion, the priest has to be on fast. The village pond is cleansed and covered with fresh foliage of trees in order to prevent any bird or animal from drinking the spring water. The village's sacred pond or spring is called Dari and it contains collection of all the produce of the country, such as- rice, pulse, oil seeds, vegetables and many more. These eatables are kept in small earthen pots, hollow bamboos and Sal leaves. In the morning of Sarhul festival, the young men of the village are supposed to trap chickens for the sacrifice. These sacrificial victims are either collected in a basket or in a fish bag covered with a piece of cloth. At noon, the village Priest and his wife take ceremonial bath at the Dari. At many places as has been observed, the priest and his wife are made to sit in their courtyard and the village headman hues their foreheads with vermilion to signify the holy marriage of the earth and the sky. Several gallons of water are poured over the couple by the people reciting the word, "bariso" repeatedly, which means "let it rain". After the ceremony, a huge procession of men accompanied by drum beats head from the village towards the Sal tree. The boisterous procession is followed by the Priest who carries all the necessary articles for

the sacrifice and pours water all along his journey. He is accompanied by his wife who carries the *saran sup* (a winnowing fan). At the foot of Sal tree all the prayer articles are kept carefully. The priest starts the procedure of worship by clearing the ground and smearing it with fresh cow-dung. A handful of *arwa* rice (non-steamed rice) is placed for each spirit on the clearing. The priest offers the sacrifice by beheading the chosen chickens and drops some blood on the rice heaps and on the *sup* and then tosses them on the ground in front of him. The sacrificed chicken is later cooked and their heads are eaten only by the priest. The vital parts are offered to the spirits, while the rest of the meat is boiled with rice and distributed to all men present. After the conclusion of the sacrificial meal, the priest is ceremonially lifted by the village elder and applies *sindur* (vermilion) on the Sal tree and winds three strands of unbleached thread round it. On the next day of the festival, the priest visits each house and distributes sal flowers and rice from the *sup* along with the *sarna* water (sacred water Dhari) from a pot. This holy water is sprinkled on the seeds which have been kept for the coming New Year.

Sarhul festival is not an ordinary affair involving recreational activities for personal amusement rather it is a sanguine gesture of the tribal communities inhabiting the chhotanagpur plateau through which they offer their gratitude in bounty for the generous endowments bestowed upon them by Mother Nature.

KATHORI FESTIVAL

Kathori is an agricultural festival which is celebrated on the very first day of the new moon of Baisakh i.e. usually in the months of April and May. It is generally celebrated by the Adivasi group of Surguja district of Madhya Pradesh. Like Sarhul, Kathori too is celebrated with great pomp and show by the villagers and announcement of the festival is made in advance. After the commencement of the festival day, all womenfolk of the village fetch water from the well because they willn't be permitted to use well water on the Kathori day. On Kathori day it is said, villagers take their meal at around 10a.m. Then they take a measuring flask from each house and fill it with paddy grains. The mouths of these vessels are sealed with cow-dung. The villagers plant some *Dubba* grass (*cynodon dactylon*) in those measuring flasks. Men folk then go the sacred place of worship also called *Sarna*, in huge procession along with their ploughshares. The *Dubba* grass used in the Kathori festival depicts the green and rich crop of the coming agricultural year. The cow-dung used to seal the mouths of the measuring vessels represents cattle and its importance in the lives of the villagers. The fire that is provoked by the menfolk after reaching the *sarna* together signifies the first fire human beings ever made as has been inscribed in the Oraon creation myth. The young menfolk digging the field before the sacred groove with ploughshares represents the significance of sowing the crop seeds during the busy agricultural year. The water that is sprinkled on young men while they are digging symbolizes good and plentiful rain during the year. Thus, each and every episode of the festival ends with the same note and that is communion with nature for she is the one who nourishes us to survive on earth.

Later on Kathori day, after returning from the *Sarna*, rice cakes which have been prepared earlier before leaving for the sacrifice are distributed in each house along with the Sal flowers. These flowers are placed on the ears or in the hair of the household members. Accommodating flowers with the Prasad of the worship helps us to analyze the affectionate socio-religious bonding these tribal men and women share with nature. On the next day of Kathori, the village council holds a meeting to finalize the day for sowing the first seeds of the year. So, the following day, the heads of all households go to their fields to sow a little amount of seed and come back. This is called the ritual of inauguration of sowing. Also, this day is generously celebrated by the villagers with a good meal and good drink of rice beer. Sacrifice of live chickens are also offered to the ancestors, may be with the intention to seek their blessings for the coming agricultural year. Thus, the festival comes to an end. Sarhul and Kathori both exemplify the sanguine relationship shared in between the tribal folks and nature. On one hand where the mainstream population of the country make out new plans to

uproot forests and plant more industries, these tribal communities are providing a safe haven to these natural resources to survive by celebrating their significance through their festivals.

KARAM

The Karam festival, also known as Bhado Ekadashi, is popularly celebrated by the Oraon tribes on the eleventh day of the lunar month of August and September. It is primarily celebrated by the unmarried girls who are recently been engaged. Another reason attached to the festival is related to the protection of the standing crops. However, it is usually celebrated as the feast for young girls who pray to seek blessings of healthy children. Eight days before the *Karam* day the unmarried take their freshly prepared bamboo baskets and go to the river to bring sand. This sand is heaped in the house having the *Karam* tree (*Nauclea Parvifolia*). These young girls sing and dance around that heap. Some maize seeds are mixed with the heap. Each one of them fills her basket with that mixture and takes it home. This mixture is regularly watered by the young girls in their respective houses with turmeric water. After the eight day, the seeds get richly germinated and their tender and beautiful greenish and yellow blades appear eye- captivating. In the afternoon of the Karam day the girls go for flower plucking by putting on their traditional dress i.e. saris with red borders. Also, they fix the young *jawa* (sprouts) in their hair buns. Young boys also dress themselves nicely. They usually wear long Dhotis, shirts and turbans. The whole group of young girls and boys assembles in the Karam courtyard and sing and dance for some time before cutting of the Karam branches. Three branches are selected which are straight and not damaged in any way either by worms or by pests. One of the young boys cuts them. According to the tradition, the boy who cuts the branches must ensure that it don't fall on the ground. He is supposed to hand over the dismantled branch with care and reverence to the girls, who carry them on their shoulders while dancing and singing. At the sound of the music and singing of the party, the rest of the village folks come out to meet the dance party at that house having the Karam tree. The wife of the head of the karma household stands at the threshold of the courtyard to receive the Karam branches from young girls. These branches are planted by the lady of the household in her courtyard. She simply digs a hole in the center of the courtyard with the ploughshare and plants the branches in the ground. She applies some oil and vermilion on the lower part of the branches. This ritual represents the spiritual marriage ceremony in between the deity residing on the karam- tree and the unmarried girls of the village. Following it, the girls pay their homage to the Karam branches and sit in a circle around the planted Karam branches to listen to the narration of Karam story. The Karam story is a mythological story which eulogizes the importance of Karam tree and may have been fabricated by ancestors to invoke respect towards trees in general folks. After the narration of the story ends, the girls give *jawa* to their brothers and other visitors present to put it behind their ears or in their hairs. Thus, the festivals ends with young girls getting generous blessings for having a healthy baby.

HARIARI

Hariari is celebrated as the festival of green paddy plants and takes place in the month of July. Like Sarhul and Kathori, day for Hariari is decided by the village council and is usually announced in advance. The festival begins in the morning and all the villagers accompanied by the village head gather at the festival ground. The ground is smeared with fresh cow dung. The officiant's winnowing fan is kept on the spot along with the sacrificial knife resting on it. Arwa rice (unsteamed rice) is placed by its side in a leaf cup. According to the number of animals to be sacrificed, arwa rice is arranged. The assistant of the priest washes the hoofs of each animal and the feet of each fowl before handing it over to the priest. The priest offers the sacrifice of animals to the village deity and asks him to bring luck and prosperity for all young, old and children of the village. When each victim is fed a handful of arwa rice, the priest holds each one of them and repeats similar prayers for good health and fortune of man and cattle, for good rain and crop. He cuts off the head of each victim one by one and a little blood is dropped on the leftover of the handful of rice on which it was fed. Livers of the victims are packed in Sal leaf and boiled in water. Portions of the boiled livers

are scraped off using the fingers and then offered to the deities by keeping them on the ground next to the handfuls of rice. Simultaneously, rice beer is also offered to the deity. The rest of the meat is either fried or cooked with rice and distributed to all villagers present there. Hariari is the festival which only accommodates menfolk within its circumference. Even the meat cooked after the sacrifice cannot be consumed by a woman except by little girls at home.

CONCLUSION:

Festivals are occasions which highlight the socio-cultural configuration of a particular society. Rituals followed, deities worshipped, variety of cuisines prepared, types of clothes worn and meanings attached to the ceremonies performed during the festival provide one with a lucid character sketch of the society. A detailed analysis of the festivals celebrated by the tribal communities residing in Chhotanagpur plateau region helps one to draw two concrete conclusions. A comprehensive study of the rituals practiced during these festivals helps one to understand the intrinsic bond shared between the nature and these indigenous people. The cosmopolitan culture of urban cities has made one slaves of gazettes such as mobile phones, laptops and video games. However, the traditional culture of these aboriginals is still beaming with the age old ideology of living in peace with nature. Secondly, the items of prayer, also called puja samagri, used in festivals like Sarhul, Kathori and Hariari find similarity with those used in Puja of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The use of Dubba grass is considered important in Kathori festival to seal the mouth of measuring flask. Similarly, in Satyanarayan pooja, conducted in Hindu families, the same Dubba grass, also called Dubbhi, is considered as an important ingredient to complete the pooja rituals. One can find the use of arwa rice (unboiled rice) in Sarhul festival celebrated by Oraons of Jharkhand. The unsteamed rice is used to prepare pinds used as an offering for ancestors during pind daan and Antyeshti (funeral rites) ceremonies conducted in almost every Hindu family.

Hence, it can be well speculated that the ceremonies, rituals and festivals we celebrate in different corners of India have evolved from the same primitive religion once followed by the traditional tribal societies of India.

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