

AFFIRMATION AND FELICITATION OF FEMININITY THROUGH INDIAN TRIBAL FESTIVALS: AN OVERVIEW

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India has numerous tribes and a rich tapestry of festivals where females are represented as goddesses like Mother Nature and Mother Earth, which make life possible, as also those possessing curative powers. Such goddesses ensure the physical, mental and social well being of the individuals in their environment. Of special significance among these is Mother Nature. The lives of the tribals centre around her as the progenitor, nurturer and preserver. The majority of their festivals cannot be envisaged without her presence. Since the concepts of natural and female fertility are closely entwined, these festivals mark the presence of women who are considered embodiments of *Shakti*, liveliness and energy. Thus they affirm and felicitate females as *Adi* and *Nari Shakti* both, representing life, creation and sustenance. By living together in harmony with the environment, women have defended and encouraged sharing of resources and bonding. Additionally through their singing, dancing and participation in ritual activities, they invoke the blessings of the deities whose worship and adoration make the festivals undeniably propitious and happy. They have contributed substantially to the ritual activities and distinctiveness of culture. Their connection with forest folklore, tribal mythology and legends, growth of languages and dialects as also food habits is unique and moving across generations, adds distinctiveness to the tribal and folk culture. In this way, women help sustain cultural assets. In the tribal societies, women are also representatives and major players in history, equality, democracy and socialism. Modern times demand that they hold cultural authority and simultaneously carve out a niche for their own within the broader socio-economic and political framework.

Amidst such deliberations, this research paper has discussed the ‘cultural’ and ‘religious’ significance of females as goddesses and common womenfolk in tribal festivals throughout India and how they have shaped up the outlook of the society. Historical research traditionally revolves around written records, memoirs, diaries, accounts, laws, tax lists and so on. In the case of tribal history, there remains a gap because the tribes are less likely to have authored narratives of their people. Moreover official records are not free from prejudice and neglect. This is even more explicit for tribal women who have received scant attention. To fill in the gaps, oral history, iconography, artifact interpretation and folklore prove useful. Thus for this paper, both primary and secondary sources have been resorted to. Information has been elicited through personal interviews, observation, folklore, legends and oral history. Of particular help have been the documentaries, research papers and articles. In addition, the district gazetteers have been of great aid in providing concrete and reliable information.

Since females of all ages are enthusiastic participants of festivals, it becomes imperative to discuss their contribution. Beginning with Jharkhand, parts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, some common festivals celebrated are Sarhul, Korom or Jani Shikar, Sohrai and Devuthaan among others. Coming to Sarhul first, it is a major festival celebrated in March-April, more specifically on Chaitra Shukla Paksha. Dedicated to Mother Nature. It marks the beginning of the agrarian season. Sarhul comprises two words *sar* and *hul*. *Sar* has been explained as *sarai* or seed of the shaal or sal tree whereas *hul* is ‘worship’. Thus sarhul is worship of the sal tree. It is also known as *Baha Parab*, denoting the ‘festival of flowers’. In Kurukh language, it is also referred to as *Khaddi* or the ‘festival of children’ because ‘khadd’ means a child. It is commonly celebrated by the Oraon tribe followed by others such as Munda, Khadia, Santhal and Ho.

The festival marks the presence of the divine as well as the terrestrial females as protectors and conservators of habitat and environment. The tribals attach great importance to Goddess *Adi Shakti* Devi Sarna whose abode is the holy Sal tree. Since the festival concerns itself with a good agrarian yield, the Oraon tribe in particular celebrates Sarhul only after the Sal trees get new branches, leaves and flowers.. In the three-day festival, the

village priest *Pahan* and his wife, the *Pahanaain* are represented as Sun God and Mother Earth Goddess respectively and bonded together as husband and wife.¹ . Among Oraons of Assam however, it is the solemnization of marriage between the earth and the sky to ensure the former's fertility.² Only after their marriage on the first day, fruits and vegetables are partaken. The tradition of *Phoolkhonsi* gives importance to this couple who moves with a winnow and a pitcher to houses of the village and fixes a flower on each symbolizing amiability among the people, the concept holding its all-time pertinence. The lady of the house welcomes both respectfully. makes them sit, washes their feet and puts *teeka* on the winnow and pitcher and gives *dakshina* too. On the first day itself the newly married daughter is invited with her husband to the house. Thus in Sarhul, the females mark their presence as goddess, priests' wives, the lady of the house and daughter.. Considerable stress is on *sal* and *mahua* trees which are worshipped not only for their cultural significance but also for their economic worth. It is the women who play a major role in the economic activities, sustenance and preservation of the environment.of the many legends related to Sarhul, one concerning Mother Earth and her only daughter Bindi runs as follows. One day, when Bindi did not come home. Mother Earth was sorrowful and started crying. In response, the leaves started falling and there was gloom everywhere. Then it came to be known that she was with the God of Death in the underworld (*patal lok*) . On refusal of giving Bindi back, he came to know to his horror that the Mother too would die. Fearing her death and the end of creation, he restored life in Bindi with the condition that during the first half of the year, Bindi would reside on earth and in the second half, in the underworld. Sarhul celebrates the advent of Bindi on Earth. There is greenery and happiness everywhere.³

Another important festival is *Jani Shikar*, held every twelve years, sometime between the months of March or June on a spring day. In Sadri language, it signifies the 'woman's hunt' Also called *Sendra* or 'hunting', its common forms are *Mukka Sendra* and *Chhechhda Sendra*. It celebrates tribal women warriors particularly those of Jharkhand, parts of Chhattisgarh and Odisha. In this all-female festival, men are prohibited from participating in the hunting. Participating women wake up at the crack of dawn, put on men's clothes and set out with weapons like spears, bows and arrows to reach a local *akhara*, an area designated for social and religious gatherings. After receiving the blessings of the village priest or *pahan*, they set out to hunt for the whole day, moving across neighbouring villages. Their catch consists of poultry, pigs and goats which they bring to the *akhara* at the end of the day where they are garlanded. Then they share it, return to their homes, where they cook and eat it together. Living harmoniously, sharing of resources and strong tribal bonds are brought out beautifully by the womenfolk.

The festival of *Jani Shikar* commemorates a famous battle fought valiantly by the women of Oraon or Aka tribe against the invading army and defeating it at Rohtasgarh fort. The town of Rohtas was once the stronghold of the Oraon kingdom. Some traditions place their origin in the Carnatic from where they moved up to Narmada and eventually settled in Bihar, on the banks of River Son where they built a fort at Rohtasgarh.⁴ Some historians claim that the Oraons defeated the Cheros whereas according to other versions, they were either the Turks led by Bakhtiyar Khalji or the Mughals.

The oral history in this connection relates to a female too called Lundari. Ahir by caste, she tipped off the enemy to attack the Oraons on Sarhul night when men were asleep, tired by merriment and incapacitated under the inebriating effect of *handiya* or traditional rice beer. The women fortunately, were still awake, winding up the day's work. When attacked, they found themselves in a difficult situation. Undaunted, they decided to take up arms and fight. It was the Oraon princess Sinagi Dai and her friends Champai Dai and Kailli Dai as also other women. dressed and armed like men who went out to fight. The concerned folk song commemorating their valiance and fearlessness runs as follows

O dekha
Aye Gelain Raja Beti Sinagi,
Dai
Sathe- Sathe Champai , Kaili
Aur sobhe janana man
Mude Feta, Hathi Chinyari
Mardana Bain ke

(O! See the king's daughter Sinagi Dai has come and along with her Champai and Kailli and all the ladies , with turbans tied on their heads and bows and arrows in their hands, they become like men")⁵ In this long-drawn battle, these women warriors fought courageously and managed to save many lives but unfortunately, suffered defeat in the third round of the contest. The enemy caught hold of them and branded the women thrice on their foreheads signifying their debacle. What would have been the three linear dots of shame, began to be reckoned as symbols of pride. Later, women in coming generations would adorn their foreheads with three traditional tattoos, reminiscent of the valour of the Oraon women. This memorable legend where women shunning their traditional, 'internalized' role of being restricted to the private domain, moved on to the larger one, holds far-reaching connotations in modern times. Responding to the changed notions in modern times, not only the Oraon but Munda, Santhal, Ho and Kharia tribes too have begun to celebrate *Jani Shikar*. Then, whereas in the past, women wore *karea*, similar to men's lungi, and hunted down whatever they sighted, in present times, they prefer to be clad in trousers and shirts, and hunt only that livestock which is set aside for them.

Another festival related to valour of young women is the Tusu Parab. This festival also signifies prosperity. Named after a girl of the same name, this Parab is basically celebrated by unmarried girls who consider Tusu a symbol of purity and worship her. The legend attached to it records the bravery of a young girl, Tusu who tried to save the farmers of her village from the oppression of the local ruler and to save herself from his advances, sacrificed her life by jumping in a river. Keeping her chastity and sacrifice in mind, the unmarried girls make idols of Tusu, worship and finally immerse them in rivers.⁶

Another harvest festival Karma. Is held on the eleventh day of a full moon of the Hindu month of Bhadra or Bhado, Celebrated by diverse tribes as Kharia, Korba, Bhumij, Oraon, Munda, Santal, Bhumij, Lohra among others, it is linked closely to nature where people pray for healthy germination of seeds for it is believed that such worship enhances the fertility of the soil. Karam *Devatas* or Karam *Devis* denoting power and youth are also worshipped along with branches of the *karam* tree. Unmarried girls celebrate the festival for welfare, friendship and sisterhood by exchanging a *jawa* flower. They plant nine kinds of seeds in a basket also called *jawa* and nurture it. With the cracking of dawn on festival day, women engage themselves in pounding rice in a *dheki*, a wooden container to get rice flour. They even dance to the beat of folk songs (siring).

Devuthaan celebrated on Kartik shukla paksha chaturdashi marks the contribution of women in a unique way. They fast and put marks of wet rice flour mixture and sindoor on agricultural implements, weight balances, arms and weapons, trees and wells. The day becomes special because only on that day of the year, women can touch agricultural implements.

Another important festival marking the women is Sohrai. Its preparations start just after Vijaydashmi. In this four-day festival, the second day marks *Gauraiya Poojan* (worship of the sparrows). Understanding the importance of preserving the environment with its birds and animals, women worship the sparrows and livestock. Amidst the dwindling number of the sparrows in present times, this festival holds great significance. Women also decorate their doorways and courtyards with Sohrai painting which depicts sanctified motifs of plants, animals and birds.

In Central India, as in many parts of the country, the earth cult is very prominent especially during harvest festivals and many tribes celebrate the Earth's marriage with the

Sun in the spring. Devi or Mata represents Mother Earth while Bara-deo, the inter-tribal god has Shriyal Jangu as his wife also called Rat Mai. She is the goddess of the night and makes children happy. Among the Gonds, a festival called Hulki is celebrated. It begins in the month of Bhado and lasts till the Diwali day. It is dedicated to Lingo or Mata, the goddess of tattoo or smallpox. In numerous folk songs, she is identified with an Ojha woman who puts the tattoo (smallpox) marks on the Gond woman. One of the songs denoting her might runs as follows:

*The Ojha woman is very strong,
She tattoos for the whole life,
Such is the mighty Ojha woman.⁷*

In addition, there are folk songs like the Mata Sewa songs for smallpox, Janwara songs of Devi Maa during Navratri, Bans and Dewar songs of Raut and Dewar tribes respectively. In all of these, women figure significantly.

Madhya Pradesh also has certain tribal festivals marking the presence of women like the Bhagoria or the Bhagauria festival. Primarily a Bhil festival, it is celebrated on the occasion of Holi when rabi crops ripen. Its most popular part is the *haat* where through a *swayamvar*, a woman chooses her groom. This is a very modern and advanced concept of a tribal society which empowers the women to select their life partners. Young men and women come here to find partners and ritualistically elope, after which they are recognized as married couples by the society. If however the girl refuses the proposal, the boy has to first pursue and convince her for it. The Ghadalya festival of Malwa too recognizes the presence of females. In it a perforated pitcher is kept on the head of a young woman and songs are sung. Somewhat akin to Ghadalya festival is the Suata festival of Bundelkhand region. In this festival, a statue of a demon is installed on the wall. The upper part of it has the statues of Shiva and Parvati placed. The primary belief relates to the Neolithic concept of fertility. The walls are adorned with images of the sun and the moon. Young girls worship the statues and images and sing songs marking the occasion.

The tribals of Odisha celebrate many festivals prominent among which is the Chaitra Parab basically celebrated by the Koya tribe which also calls it Bija Pandu. Reverence is paid to Gudimata - the Mother Earth and also to the Earth which they call *Bhumu*. The inception of Chaiti Parab occurred in undivided Koraput district where Maa Dakhinakali, the presiding deity of Jaipur is situated. Considered the protector of the entire Koraput region, her blessings are evoked prior to the actual singing of the songs of Chaiti Parab.

*Jai Jai Kali Maa Dakhin Kali
Uluti sharan gali
Chait parab karuchen arambh*

Similarly, Mata Bhandar Gharini, the presiding deity of Nabarangpur and Dharamgarh and Maa Manikeshwari of Kalahandi are also called forth.⁸ Other festivals of Koya tribe include Kodta Pandu, Bimud Pandu and Idu or Ikk Pandu. Bimud Pandu held in Magh-Phalgun is observed just after harvest of all types of crops. Two small clay models of the rain god and his wife are worshipped by the priest and villagers. An unmarried girl is made to stand between the clay models and the priest. Villagers sprinkle water over models to signify the marriage,⁹ Sall Gachha (Sal tree) and Mahula Gachha (Mahua tree) are held sacred and worshipped.

Among the North-eastern States of India, tribals celebrate festivals which bear the presence of women. In Arunachal Pradesh, the females of the Galo tribe celebrate Nyirmen festival on the 14th and 15th of October. Recognizing the worth of females in manual labour and harvesting, it ensures that they come out of the drudgery and spend their time in rejuvenation and merriment. On this occasion, they even dress up as men.¹⁰ In the dance festival of Dore Rata, the females show their courage and dauntless spirit by trying to knock off the turbans of their male counterparts. This could probably be a way to shun male dominance and ensure gender equality. Among the Adi tribe, many festivals are celebrated

which relate to numerous female deities such as the mother goddess of grain, crops and prosperity Kiine Naane, During Bote, the Divine Protector of Life and Dadi Bote, the protector of domestic animals. In the Piming festival, the womenfolk go to their respective fields and while chanting prayers, throw big stones in fields to invoke the goddess Kiren Genne. At the Riktu Festival, people pray to her to festoon the new paddy (ammo).¹¹

Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem, the festival of Khasi people, symbolizes female fertility and calls for participation of young, unmarried females. In the harvest festival of Wangala, also called the Festival of the Hundred Drums, Men and women of Garo tribe living in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Assam worship the Sun God. In Assam, Ainam songs are sung to propitiate Mother Sitala, the smallpox goddess. Similarly, among the Hos, Nagay Era or Bunday Era is the goddess of itch.¹²

Festivals of Uttarakhand accord a high status to females. Notable among them are the Kandali, Athon and Harela festivals. Of these, akin to Jani Shikar in female courage and prowess, is the Kandali festival of Rung tribe in the Chaudans valley of Pithoragarh district in the Kumaun division. It celebrates the defeat of the army of the Sikh general Zorawar Singh in 1841. According to the local legends, it was the women who defended the region when the army invaded it and tried to loot the villagers. The brave heroines hid in the kandali shrub which got destroyed during the combat. This festival marks the flowering of the kandali flower which happens every twelve years. In this week-long festival, Lord Shiva is worshipped and prayers take place for victory over enemies. The scene of resistance is also enacted.¹³ In another festival called Athon of the same division, celebrated on the eighth day of Bhado month, married women are considered symbols of prosperity for their families. A thread is tied on their left arm for their protection.

The festival of Harela in Uttarakhand has not only religious connotations but as indicated by the name, it denotes greenery and concepts of love for nature, environmental protection, sustenance and upgradation. It relates to Mother Earth and its love for its children. Such emphasis on mother and motherly love finds representation in the encouragement which mothers on earth provide to their children on this festival day to become hardworking and to come out victorious in the struggle of life (jeevan-ran). The following song expresses the wish and blessings of a mother for them :

Jee raye, jaagi raye, tishtiye, panapiye,

Doob jas hari jad ho, byar jas phaiye,...

(Be victorious on the path of life, stay awakened, prosper and progress. Be youthful, dynamic and full of life like the forever green root of the doob grass, may your labour bear fruit like the ber (jujube) tree.). This festival is followed by Bhitauli, another agriculture-based festival celebrated in the month of Chaitra (March- April).

In the West, the tribes of Maharashtra such as Andh, Gond, Kathadi, Bhaniya, Pavara, Kathi and others celebrate festivals like Holi in which both men and women participate. In the State of Goa, the common Adivasi tribes are Kunbis, Gawdas, and Velip Among these, Kunbis are considered the oldest settlers of Goa. Their songs and dances represent the oldest folk traditions of the State.¹⁴ Dhillo is a popular festival of the tribals of Goa. Celebrated on the eve of Diwali, it marks the worship of Kartikeya, the son of Lord Shiva. Just as the festival of Shigmo involves dance and merriment of men, Dhillo relates to such zestful activities of women. They get an opportunity to escape from the usual drudgery and enjoy their freedom to the fullest.

In the South. The commonly celebrated tribal functions are Shiral of Adilabad, Sammakka Saralamma Jatara in Warangal and Modakondamma festival of Andhra Pradesh. At Anji in Adilabad, a large number of newly married Andh Adivasi women gather to celebrate 'Shiral' during which they pray to Lord Shiva and Lord Nagoba to bless them with children. Childless couples too visit to seek blessings for children. Shiral falls on the next day of Nagapanchami. Women worship the snake god. Snake worship is common in agrarian countries and India is no exception. Young girls enjoy themselves on swings.¹⁵ The Sammakha Saralamma Jatara is a four-day festival to honour the Hindu tribal goddesses-

the mother-daughter duo Samakkha and Saralamma every two years. Traditionally, it was observed by the Koya tribe though in present times, non-Koya people too celebrate the festival. It commemorates the fight of both mother and daughter against the unjust laws of the local rulers. In due course both began to be worshipped as manifestations of Adi Parashakt and protectors of the tribals. In Andhra Pradesh, a three-day festival is celebrated in honour of Modakondamma, the main tribal deity of the region. Her temple is considered one of the Shakti Peeths

Thus it can emphatically be said that women form an indispensable part of tribal culture by being the indissociable link between man and nature. Unfortunately, women have always been subverted in the 'history from below'¹⁶ and have been victims of 'systematic omission' in traditional historiography. This is all the more true for tribal women. The 'women's question' which was put forth in the nineteenth century, still eludes tribal women. Regrettably, the apathy of colonial times continues to plague Independent India too where they have been denied a place of dignity, identity and authority in the society. Traditionally considered progenitors, nurturers and preservers, they have also been major players in modern concepts of democracy, equality and socialism within their tribal societies. Time has now come that while holding cultural authority, women should move from their essentialized, internalized domain to the outer, bigger domain and spread their wings.

Various aspects call for attention as far as thrust on tribal areas and women is concerned. The large tribal belt from Jharkhand to Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha shows finer variances in culture, language, dialects and cuisine which generally go unnoticed. For instance, the Mundas and Oraons are clubbed as one despite their differences. The same is the case of tribes in Maharashtra who celebrate Holi for different reasons. Tribal women have a major role to play as religious facilitators in carrying forth the traditions and religious customs.. Such facts need to be brought to light.

Also, the folk songs, dances and literature contain voices of the tribal women regarding their dreams, desires, thoughts, feelings and emotional traumas. As repositories of inter-gender and intra-gender relations, they delve into the position of women in their families and society and serve as valuable and effective means of gender sensitization. They also create an awareness regarding our traditions, customs and festivals. Recognizing such worth, while Mahatma Gandhi called the folk songs 'sentinels of our culture', Lala Lajpat Rai rightly considered them 'invaluable treasure of the history of our progress'. With the thrust on regional languages and mother tongues in the New Education Policy of the year 2020, it is time now to assign greater importance to folk expressions and also recognize the worth of tribal women in this field.

Modern gender studies are moving away from reductionist or essentialized theories which constrict or restrict females to realize their potential to the fullest. Women particularly of the tribal areas need to be recognized as active participants in culture, society, economy and politics. Invisibility to visibility, exclusion to inclusion and from margins to mainstream-all such aspects require immediate attention for an all-inclusive, egalitarian society.

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