

The Tribal World and the Tribal Way: A Cultural Study of Santals' Baha Parab

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Abstract

Culture has been called the way of life for an entire society that is passed down from generation to generation. As such, it includes codes of manner, dress, language, religion, rituals, art, norms of behavior, and systems of belief. Culture is an integral part of human life. Every human being has been retaining his or her own culture generation after generation. In this paper my aim is to discuss the Santal's Baha Parab which the Santal people have been celebrating generation after generation to retain their culture as Baha Parab is a cultural festival.

Keywords: Culture, rituals, belief, Baha Parab, festival, tribal.

Introduction

Culture is a way of life. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the languages we speak in and the God we worship all are aspects of culture. In every simple term, we can say that culture is the embodiment of the way in which we think and do things. It is also the thing we have inherited as members of society. All the achievements of human beings as members of social groups can be called culture, which includes the customs, traditions, festivals, ways of living and one's outlook on various issues life.

Culture thus refers to a human made environment which includes all the material and non-material products of group life that are transmitted from generation to the next:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior. (Spencer 3)

The essential core of culture thus lies in those finer ideas which are transmitted within a group- both historically derived as well as selected with their attached value. More recently, culture denotes historically transmitted patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and express their attitude towards life. In fact, culture is the expression of our nature in our moods of living and thinking. It may be seen in our literature, in religious practices, in recreation and enjoyment:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, consisting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consist of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture system may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 181)

Culture varies from place to place and country to country. Its development is based on the historical process operating in a local, regional or national context. For example, we differ in our ways of greeting others, our clothing, food habits, social and religious customs and practices

from the west. In other words, the people of any country are characterized by their distinctive cultural traditions.

The word 'culture' and 'Civilization' are often used synonymously. 'Civilization' means having better ways of living and sometimes making nature bend to fulfill their needs. It also includes organizing society into politically well-defined groups working collectively for improved condition of life in matters of food, dress, and communication and so on. On the other, culture refers to the inner being, a refinement of head and heart. This includes art, science, music, dance and various pursuits of human life which are also classified as cultural activity: "Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society" (Edward Taylor N.pag.).

Cultural development is a historical process. Our ancestors learnt many things from their predecessors. With the passage of time, they also added to it their own experience and gave up those which they considered useless. We in turn have learnt many things from our ancestors. As time flies, we continue to add new thoughts, new ideas to those already existent and sometime we give up some which we consider are not useful any more. This is how culture is transmitted and carried away from generation to generation. The culture we inherit from our predecessors is called our cultural heritage. This heritage exists at various levels. Humanity as a whole has inherited a culture which may be called human heritage. Cultural heritage includes all those aspects or values of culture transmitted to human beings by their ancestors. They are cherished, protected and maintained by them with unbroken community and they feel proud of it. A few examples would be helpful in clarifying the concept of heritage. The Taj Mahal, Swami Narayan Temple of Gandhinagar and Delhi, Red Fort of Agra, Delhi's Qutub Miner, Mysore Palace, etc are all important places of our heritage are to be protected by all means. Besides the architectural creations, material artifacts, the intellectual achievements, scientific inventions and discoveries are also part of our heritage. In Indian context the contribution of Baudhayan, Aryabhata, Bhaskaracharya in the fields of Mathematics, Astronomy and astrology; Kanad and Varahmihir in the field of Physics; Nagarjuna in the field of Chemistry; Susruta and Charak in the field of medicines and Patanjali in the field of Yoga are profound treasures of cultural heritage. Culture

is liable to change, but our heritage does not. We individuals, belonging to a culture or particular group, may acquire or borrow certain cultural traits of other communities or cultures, but our belongingness to Indian cultural heritage will bind us together e.g. Indian literatures and scriptures namely “Vedas”, “Upanishads”, “Gita”, and Yoga systems etc have contributed a lot by way of providing right knowledge, right action, behavior and practices as complimentary to the development of civilization. In fact:

Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individual of a population, including those images or ecodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individual themselves. (T. Schwartz 17)

Culture is very much important to all the people of India. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Santals etc have their own cultures. Just as Hindus consider culture as integral to their life, similarly the tribal community people like Santals, Mundas regard and maintain their culture devotedly. The Santal community lives not at the centre of the village; rather they live on the outskirts of the village. The tribal community even today consists of one of the largest, most cohesive and resilient tribes in Eastern India. They have certainly been the most written about in songs and literature beginning from the days of Raj. They understand the world in terms of relationship. They are convinced that the world and all that is in it are made for use and not for the abuse, for sustenance and for dominance. Fraternal coexistence is preferred over fraternal quarrel and tension. Santals are those who believe that nature < human beings and spirits are dependent on each other as organisms. Land, forest air and water are God-given with no ruler or national government having proprietary ownership of them. Human beings are custodians of everything around them and must relate with everything as relatives and friends and live in harmony with them.

The Santals have a culture of their own which they have preserved unchanged from time immemorial. Until recently, the Santal society has not faced with any invasion- cultural or religious, either from within or without. They have, so far, enjoyed both external and internal autonomy concerning their religiosity and world view which they have remained unaltered and unquestioned. Their religious life and cultural festivals, mainly connected to nature and agriculture, are so attractive and many, both from homeland and abroad, have written books and articles depicting various aspects of them in an attempt to understand and appreciate them better. In fact, every society, 'advanced' or 'primitive' has anthropological, sociological, political, theological and other dimensions to it. There are authors who have closely followed and narrated relating and pertaining to their social, anthropological and political characteristics, but not many have attempted to decipher the deeper dimensions of the Santals. To know fully about the Santals, one must enter into the world view of the Santals: their conception of the world and its origin, their anthropology, their sociology and their eschatology.

There is a very close link between the social structure and the religious universe of the Santals. The Santals live not only in their human tribal society, but also in a greater society consisting of supernatural being as well. Naturally, their whole mindset and religiosity is shaped by their experience of them in their life journey. The Santals believe that the world is a vast arena in which man/woman, spirits and impersonal powers are constantly in touch with each other. The entire world is referred to as "Towadari; milk tree". Every household, clan, sub-clan, and village community must ensure its integrity and maintain the harmony. The Santals believe that the world in which they are living is inhabited by a large number of spiritual beings of various kinds whom they call 'bongos' which literally means spirits. They are of the opinion that they are completely surrounded by these 'bongas' who are said to be prevalent among the Santals who constantly either intervene or hinder them in their enterprises and affairs: 1. Village tutelary spirits consisting of Marang Buru, Moreko-Turuiko, Jaher Era, Pargana Bonga and Manjhi Haram Bonga. 2. The abge bongas or sub-clan spirits, 3. Household Spirits known as 'Orak Bongako', 4. The spirits of ancestors, known as 'Hapramko Bongas', 5. Tutelary spirits or the sakat bongas of the Santals Ojhas (exorcist), 6. The duku bongas or the Hindu deities that find a

place in the Santals' pantheon, 8. Here, there are quite a few namely 'Sima Bongas' or the village boundary spirits of the village outskirts, Buru/Dunri bongas or mountain or hill spirits, the bahre bongas or the spirits that occupy water and the like. These spirits are by nature harmful. 9. Then there are a peculiar kind of bongas that include the 'Naihar Bongas', 'Kisar Bongas', 'Thapna Bongas' and the bonga husband of witches. These bongas or spirits cause some disease or other mischief which are found through the Ojha divination. The ojha then exorcises them lest they continue to malfunction and torture them. 10. Finally, there are tramp or stray mischievous spirits and impersonal powers which are not the object of worship; instead they have to be driven away through exorcism or magic. Among these, there are curins, bhuts, ekagudias and rakas.

The members of the santals' invisible world, strictly speaking, might be of two types, the departed of their own family and the bongas in general. Sometimes the Santals themselves are unable to have precise terms and concepts regarding the exact nature and function of the spirits but should not be taken to mean that they do not differentiate between the various spirits. Agriculture is the source of sustenance for the Santals. Every act related to it marks special significance and is therefore preceded by supplications and sacrifices, be it ploughing, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing and the like. The Santals know from their experience that there are dangers involved in their agricultural adventure. Drought, flood, and famine are beyond their control. When struck by these, they have loss of crops and hence face a threat to their existence and identity. When they have a good rain and good crop, they have every reason to rejoice and pay obeisance to their deities. As a token of gratitude for the favors received from the benevolent bongas they worship them, and in order to maintain the good rapport with the other bongas they placket them. They do not necessarily invoke the second grade bongas, but in order to be happy and not to be troubled by them, they perform certain rituals to propitiate them. The Santal' religious rites express the conviction that the supernatural powers can be exercised by their bongas, and secondly, the bongas are invoked to secure the good will of the beneficent ones and to avert the ill-will of the maleficent ones. Among the bongas the most powerful and the chief is the Marang Buru, and the Santals believe that there is

an affinity between the Marang Buru and the ancestors of their village. The second famous deity is Moreko-Turuiko, though literally means five or six is venerated as one spirit who is supposed to look after the welfare of the village and to have control over rain, crops and epidemics. The third famous deity is Jaher Era. She is a lady of the sacred Grove or the 'Jaher Than' for she is believed to be residing in the Sacred Grove. She never harms the Santals; in its stead she concerns herself with the bodily needs of the Santals obtaining them good crops. She is believed to be instrumental in obtaining the good health of the villagers and their cattle. She is invoked whenever the cattle disease ravages the villages. A fowl is offered to her in all the feasts and on Baha Festival (flower festival), she is remembered with extra enthusiasm. Marang Buru, Moreko-Turuiko and Jaher Era, according to Santal belief, are closely connected to themselves.

In the districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, and in all the districts of West Bengal where these Santal tribals live, the Baha Parab is celebrated. Though the rules and all the rites of this Parab are completed within two days, the tribals consider that it is a three-day festival. Baha means 'flower' in Santali. It is the second biggest festival of the Santals after Saharai, the harvest festival. It is also considered as the holiest festival of all and celebrated in the Bengali month of Falgun (Feb-March) every year. Falgun is the first month of the Santali calendar. The festival celebrates man's communion with nature. This is the time when the most common trees, like Mohuwa, Peepal, Palash, Neem, Sal, Muring etc bear new leaves, flowers and fruits. This is the time, Santals believe, when the trees become reproductive and one should not disturb their body and soul by plucking or cutting off their buds, flowers, leaves and branches. Therefore, the Santals never pluck the flowers or the fruits of Mango trees; never tear off the leaves of Peepal and Neem trees before celebrating the Baha. Women do not use the Sal flowers in their hair for decoration and trees are not cut for firewood at this time. If that happens, then the firewood is not brought to the village, but is kept outside. Any family who will break such rules will not be visited by the village priest who normally enters every family's house during the Baha rituals.

In the Baha Parab, the whole responsibility lies on the village priest or the 'Naike', who, the main celebrant of the festival, prepares himself mentally and physically for the festival on the

first day by taking a bath, by wearing new clothes and he has to fast for the whole day until the puja is over. He also keeps alone in his house at that night, away from his wife. The main puja of the Baha is held at the 'Jaher Than', the sacred Grove outside the village. The 'Naike' along with the village heads like Manjhi Haram (headman), the Jog Manjhi (the assistant headman), the Giodet (convener), the Kudamnaike (assistant priest) and other villagers go to that 'Jaher Than', clean it and make a small symbolic hut with thatch for the offering on the next day. He constructs a number of 'Pinds' (alter) and rubs them with cow dung. Some villagers make sixteen alters, some seventeen, some eighteen; in fact, the number of alters differs from one village to another. Each 'Pind' is named after one of the benevolent Bongas who are located in different parts of the village. The Bongas were discovered by the ancestors of the village. When they chose the place to build a new village, boundary was identified. Within this boundary, different spirits bearing different names are worshipped. This spots could be a bush, forest, any water body, a roadside space or simply a barren land. They believe that these spirits are the original inhabitant of these places and are protecting them. Therefore, the village people will be happy and prosperous only if they live with them harmoniously. The puja starts in the house of Naike. In the front place within the boundary of his house where there is a 'Tulsi Mancha' (the exact place of starting the puja), the Santals community people gather there in the evening of the first day of the puja. They start the puja there with the Baha songs, specially chosen for this Baha Parab. They play their own musical instruments and start to worship their gods, especially Marang Buru and Jaher Era. Side by side, they also worship some other gods and goddesses and Santals' ancestors.

On the second day, the headman-'Manjhi' sends the young men of the village to the forest to collect Sal flowers. Then on that day the Santals again come to the house of the Naike to carry him to that 'Jaher Than' where the programme takes place. After that the Naike along with the villagers go to that place with sixteen chicks, collected from the village, and offer them to the spirits of the village and of the surroundings. Not only the chickens, but also various kinds of goats are also offered to the spirits. During the offering, water instead of rice beer is being used. The 'Naike' prays to the spirits and to the ancestors who after death have joined with the spirits,

they believe. The Naike prays for all the villagers, for the children, the youth, the animals who go to the fields, forests and rivers everyday so that life may remain safe, and that the benevolent spirits may protect them from all evil spirits.

Later, the 'Naike' and the villagers prepare Khichudi and villagers and their relatives eat it. In the afternoon, 'Naike' along with his companions visits all the families and distributes Sal flowers. The women of the house receive the flowers from their priest in the fold of their saris after they have ceremonially applied oil on his feet and wash them. An unmarried man carries the water on his shoulder. After exchanging greetings with them, she sprinkles blessed water on their heads. After receiving the flowers, women put it in their hair and men in their ears. The rest of the flowers are kept in a ceiling of their thatched or tilted roof. This is the sign that the village has celebrated Baha. After it men and women are free to eat, dance, sing and drink rice beer and enjoy themselves.

Though normally the program ends within the two days, the Adibasi people believe it to be of the three-day festival. On the third day, that is the enjoyment day, people are in a joyous mood. They, on that day, pour down waters on the heads of their heads and bodies, and on the legs of their elder respected people. To celebrate it in a more beautiful way, they even use "abir", colors and colour their near and dear ones. Thus they celebrate it. They also drink on that day various kinds of wine- native or foreign. They start to dance after it. Some people throw water to them and they start to dance on that wet place. This is how they enjoy their days fully.

To know it more accurately and to make the paper more accurate with those community people's lives and culture precisely, I have surveyed a place in the district Hooghly, where there is a small village on the outskirts of which live the Santal community people. After talking to them and asking them about the Baha Parab, I find that the community people celebrate it in a devoted way. The Santals are very simple and innocent. They become so much interested about the fact that anyone, not belonging to their community, comes to their village to know about their culture and festivals.

While surveying, I, at first, asked a few villagers about the program. They informed that Baha Parab is a cultural festival, specially belonging to their community. It is the festival through which they pray their gods through the embodiment of “Sacred Container”, made out of soil. It is a festival to celebrate the gods with upcoming flowers and fruits. This festival specially takes place in the months of Falgun and Chaitra, according to the Bengali calendar. They have no special dates about the Parab; even the dates are different from one community to others. In this parab, they worship many gods and goddesses among whom the most important ones are Marang Buru and Jaher Era. According to him, Baha continues for three days- the first day being called ‘Umm’, the second ‘Sadri’, and the third ‘Baske’. On the opening day that is on the ‘Umm’ day the houses are cleaned by the community women and housewives. The programme starts in the house of ‘Naike’, the priest, in whose house the community people go and gather with their musical instruments and starts various songs especially for the Baha. On the second day, Santals along with the ‘Naike’ move towards the ‘Jaher Than’, which is outside the village, cleaned and decorated naturally by the community people. There is a huge Sal tree under which the the puja takes place. People offer their goats, chickens, cocks, and hens of various kinds as a present to the gods and spirits, and those animals are cut off during the puja as a tradition. On that day, after the puja, the ‘Manjhi’, the head of the community, ‘Naike’ and the Santal people come back to the house of ‘Naike’. When they are coming, the Santal men carry lathis brooms, normal households used weapons etc. women of the houses pour down wares on the feet of ‘Manjhi’, ‘Naike’ and all those men who are inspired by gods’ essence. On the third day they enjoy the day with their near and dear ones splashing water on their heads and bodies. Not only the puja is celebrated in this way in the present daytime, as also in the earlier times. The earlier generations were fully devoted to gods, the puja and its rites and rules. On the present day festival, rites remain the same, but some ways are different. In earlier time, the lights were not used in a large number, but now-a-days the lights are used in better way. The dresses are also different. Earlier, they did not use much costly dresses, but now they use. To the young generations the puja is very much important, but their focus lies not fully on the puja and its rites and rituals but on the enjoyment, programmes, and eating foods. They are not unserious about the programme. As they are not given so many responsibilities as handled by the seniors, they are somehow quite

free. They concentrate fully on the enjoyment of the programme. But to all the Santal people, this puja is of so much value of as it is through which they written their culture. Through various parabs, like Baha, songs, dances, they continue their cultural heritage and traditions for years after years. The song specially chosen for this parab remains available only through this parab. Even the dresses which the Santal people wear during these three days are different from their normal way of wearing saris and dresses. They believe that this culture will be successfully maintained by their sons and grandsons and daughters. Just as they follow the rules and rituals correctly, their next generations will follow them in better way. Just as they listen to about the Parabs from their seniors and elders, the future generations will also listen to and maintain the tradition and heritage.

Conclusion:

Santal festivals have always been the closed community festivals; there is a little scope for non-Santals to join and integrate with them. It was first started as Adibasi Baha Parab, but later it is extended as traditional Baha festival. The main objective is to open this festival to Santals of their village and to non-Santals and thus make it inclusive. They want to disseminate the ideas of Baha among the people at large. In fact, they always think about the fact that how do the other people accept their culture? Sometimes they face humiliation from others. But they want to contain their culture. Culture is a very important to them. Culture is closely linked with their life. It is not an add-on, an ornament that we as human beings can use. It is not merely a touch of color. It is what makes us human. Without culture, there would be no humans. Culture is made up of traditions, beliefs, and way of life from the most spiritual to the most material. It gives us meaning, a way of leading our lives. It is culture that brings us closure through philosophy and religion; it brings beauty in our lives through the arts and makes us aesthetic beings and the ethical ones by bringing us closer to other human beings and teaching us the values of love, tolerance and peace.

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