

The Maoli Mohul Tree

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Siba Tandia lives in a village called Maoli Padar in Nuapada district. Nuapada is the new district that has emerged from the old Kalahandi district. Siba lives his wife Laibana and two daughters -Tikli and Lily. He has experienced severe poverty and hardships in his life to rear his family. There has been temptation to go and work as *dadan*, migrant labourer in Hyderabad and Chennai and earn some quick money but he has not moved away from his village. He loves his village and the piece of land called home. He never leaves his home. He weaves clothes for the land lords, *gauntias*, headmen, big farmers and other prominent people of the villages around his own village. He feels so elated when these prominent customers praise his craftsmanship! He feels as if he has achieved moksha in life! His wife and children help him in his job. His wife designs the yarn with colours of different kinds and his daughters wind them around small tubes called *nalis*. Siba stretches the yarn on a sunny day and dries it on his yard. All would help him at that time. The yarn has been combed, made straight and fine before weaving clothes. Siba then weaves beautiful *lungis*, *Gamchhas* and *dhotis*. He takes pride that his materials are used by the land lords, *gauntias*, headmen and the big farmers of the locality.

Apart from weaving, Siba also cultivates his small patch of land. He has a few rice fields. There are also many trees of different kinds. They include Saahaaj, Harida, Peepal, Wild fig, Jamun and so on. Among them, there is a huge Mohul tree. It is situated on the edge of his fields. Its branches are green and dense. It is called Maoli Mohul tree because goddess Maoli, the presiding deity of the village believed to live there. Siba's daughters collect Mohul flower in the Mohul season, dry them and sell them in the market. The Mohul tree gives fruit too. They call the fruit *tol*. They would collect *tol*, dry the seeds and sell in the market or they would give it to the oil crusher- family of their village to extract oil.

Siba's family would use that oil both as talcum and edible oil. People of the village are scared of the mohul tree as it is located in a far off place, very far from the village. Nobody would venture to go there in the afternoons or night. Young people would challenge one another, "If you can go in the night and leave a flower under the mohul tree, you will be given five hundred rupees." Sometimes one of them might accept the challenge, but no one ever went there in the night. People said, there lived goddess Maoali in the tree. The villagers worship it. In case the cattle of the village are affected by any disease, they will tie some red threads, ropes and baskets to wane the spirit that caused the disease. On the day of *Maden Jatra* which falls in the harvest season, the villagers would bring hens and offer to goddess Maoli. Then they would feast on the birds making meat and sharing among themselves calling it Prasad. The Jhakar, Sombaru Bariha would be the centre of attention.

Sambaru, an old Binjhal tribal man, becomes the key person on that day. He wears a new white dhoti and a banyan, applies oil on his body and put a *Sindur* mark on his forehead. He would wrap a red *gamchha* on his shoulder and acts as the priest. Through him, the sacrificial hens are offered to the deity. He is all powerful on that day. He will be commanding the devotees, "Leave the way. Bring the hen. Come one by one. Take the Prasad. Jai Maa Maoli!!!"

Though the tree belongs to Siba Tandia, the villagers respect it. No community, be it the oil crusher, potter, blacksmith, Binjhals, goldsmith or the peasant disrespects the goddess or the mohul tree. There are other trees near this. Nobody ventured to cut any of them too. The entire grove is regarded as sacred.

Few days back, the government officials came to the village and started measuring the land. They got some instrument, put it on a stand and looked through that. The villagers were curious. The curious villagers surrounded them and asked these officials: "What are you doing, sirs? Why are you doing all these?" The officials replied, "Don't you know? 'Electri' is going to come to your village." We are planning to put the line posts for the 'electri' line. We may have to cut some trees that are on the way. The big Mohul tree is also included in the list."

The news spread like wild fire in the village. The “gormen” is going to cut the Maoli mohul tree. When Siba Tandia came to know about it, he was shocked. He ran to the village headman and asked about it, “ Gauntia, What do I hear? Is it true that the Maoli Mohul tree is going to be cut? You know , my livelihood depends on it. I get two crops from it; Its flowers and then its fruits.” The village headman, “ Hari Gauntia confirmed it. He said, “ I also heard that. It is government order! So no one can stop it. I am also helpless. I am worried about the deity.” Siba came home depressed and shared the sad news with his wife and children. All were sad and depressed. His wife Laibana said, “ The tree belonged to the entire village. The villagers should support us in protecting the tree. You ask for a *gram sabha*, village meeting.” Siba again went and requested the head man to call for a meeting of the villagers and request the government to save the tree. A meeting was called. The government officials also came. The Engineer Satya Narayana Mohanty (S.N. Mohanty as they called him) was the leader of the team. He lived with his team in a tent on the outskirts of the village. The elders said, “ The mohul tree is our mother. She protects us from all kinds of difficulties. If it is cut, we are also going to kill ourselves. The government officials said, “ If you get ‘electri’ your children can study under light. You can irrigate your land and do cultivation. Your yield will be more. You can grow trees on the other side of the road. Look at the young people. Will they live dark for ever?” The youngsters nodded their heads agreeing with the officials. Some farmers said, “ What is the use? There is no profit in farming. You spend s so much on buying seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. At the end the yield is zero. The young boys might have got some money from Mohanty babu. That’s why they are supporting him.” The young people of the village who aligned with the government officials said, “ If there is ‘electri’, even our Siba uncle can weave clothes in the night and earn more. We can let them cut the tree. We can survive without it. It is modern age now. Let us forget the old beliefs and superstitions. But Siba Tandia and others did not understand all these arguments. They found all these were non-sense. They said, “ It is upto Ma Maoli. She knows to take care of herself.”

After a few days S. N. Mohanty brought his people and cut down the tree. He showed a paper and said I have got the “gormen” order. Now , nobody can stop us from cutting down the tree. If any body resists, he will be arrested immediately.” There were two constables beside him. The villagers did not come out of fear! They knew something bad

was going to happen. The Engineer and his people had a tent on the outskirts of the village. The entire project would take six to eight months time.

The engineer and his team had to get their provisions from the village shop. They depended on the villagers to survive but the villagers did not support them. The shop keeper was non-cooperative. Other villagers were indifferent to them. The Engineer could realize this. He had some apprehension in mind. He started losing his psychological balance. He would utter the words repeatedly : “ Ma Maoli , mote maph karo.” Whoever he met he would say: “Ma Maoli mote maph karo.” People were scared of him. Nobody talked to him. He went to the town for treatment and never came back. There was no rain the following year. People e dug bore well but there was no water. The elders said, “ *Ghor Amangal!* Something very bad has happened. There is no respite. We have made the deity upset. These are the results! Will you eat your ‘electri’ now? The boys will watch videos and films and go out of their ways. What has happened to this village?” But no body had the cure to the problem.

Siba Tandia did not earn anything from his fields that year. His crops were damaged due to lack of rain. He also found it difficult to sell his clothes. Who would buy if they don't have good earning? Siba passed away out of depression. People surrounded his body. They praised his devotion to work, sincerity and loyalty. His relatives and friends came. They buried him and planted another Mohul plant on his grave and it grew up very fast. The villagers respected the young mohul tree as they used to respect their Maoli Mohul tree.