



Role of religion and rituals in tribal life: A study of Gopinath Mohanty's Novel *Paraja*

Dilshad Ali

Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, M.D. University Rohtak, Haryana, India

Abstract

Religion and rituals play a vital part in every society. They are part of their everyday life. In tribal life, the religious practices and patterns are critical as their lives revolve around them. The present paper will discuss the aspects of religion and rituals associated with it in the life of the people of the Paraja tribe, as shown in Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja*. It will also highlight the nature of tribal religion in general. They have a firm belief in their gods even in their adversities, as they believe that their gods can never betray them. The people of the Paraja tribe profess their tribal religion, which is an admixture of animism with later addition of elements of Hinduism by external influence.

Keywords: tribal religion, rituals, Paraja, gods, supernatural, sacred, animal sacrifice

Introduction

With over 60 distinct tribal groups, Odisha has the largest tribal population in a single state in India. These tribal groups spread over the eastern ghat hills ranges in Koraput, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, and Keonjhar districts. Tribes constitute nearly 22 per cent of the total population of Odisha. Each tribe has its unique religious customs, rituals, cultural practices, social organization, and language inherited or acquired through many cultural cross-currents. Religion and traditions play an essential part in the tribal life of Odisha. The tribal religion is an admixture of animism, animalism, and nature worship. The significant events of tribal life are highly ritualized. The religious performances of the tribals include life-crisis rites, cyclic community rites, ancestor and totemic rites and observances of taboos. Besides, the tribal also believes in various types of occult practices and supernatural forces. Tribal belief in Gods and Goddesses, Ghosts, witchcraft, magic, illness or misfortune is attributed to displeasure and malicious acts of the magical powers, evil spirits.

Gopinath Mohanty is considered one of the most important Odia fiction writers of the 20th century. He became the first Odia writer to receive the prestigious Jnanpith award in 1974. Besides this, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1955 for his Novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals* (Amrutara Santana) and the Padma Bhushan in 1981. He has written twenty-four novels, ten volumes of short stories, three plays and many books of critical essays. Out of his twenty-four novels, five deal with the lives of different tribes. They are *Danapani*, *Dadibudha*, *Amrutara Santana*, *Paraja*, *Matimatala* and *Apahancha*. During his service in the Koraput district, he tries to understand the tribal life of mountains and forests. And he attempts to tell the stories of their suffering and oppression caused by the defective social systems.

The Novel *Paraja* was written in 1945 and translated into English in 1987 by Bikram K Das. The novel's setting is a small village called Sarsupadar in the Koraput district inhabited by the Paraja and Domb tribes. It is a tragic tale of the aboriginal tribe, exploited by petty government officials and greedy money landers (Sahukars) in the pre-independent period. SukruJani, the novel's protagonist and his family represent all the tribes to whom all the forests and hills once belonged. The story is replete with a charming depiction of the lifestyle, religion, customs and traditions of the Paraja tribes. The paraja lead a religious and colourful life with their song and dance, marriage and god-worship. They have their unique rich tradition, which must be preserved and respected.

Aspects of Tribal Religion and Rituals in the Novel

Rituals or ceremonies are the pivots around which some thoughts about supernatural rotate. Rituals are, however, nothing but the implementation of beliefs. Rituals are usually set apart as a body of custom significantly associated with religious performances. A ritual may precisely be described as the way of performing a sacred act, that is, playing, singing, dancing for the gods making sacrifices or preparing offerings.

The Paraja profess their tribal religion, which is an admixture of animism with later addition of elements of Hinduism by external influence. Their supreme deity is Patrabuda, and his consort Jakar, the earth goddess, is installed under the shed of trees on the outskirts of the village and is revered as the deity of agriculture. Their village deity Nissan Munda is seated in the centre of the village street and is worshipped by their traditional priest Jani. She is propitiated during all the rituals and festivals to protect the village from calamities. They also propitiate some deities of nature residing in hills, forests, streams and rivers, namely, dongar devta (hill god),

janikudi, khandual etc. Over time, under the impact of local Hindu culture, they have incorporated some Hindu Gods, rituals, and deities into their pantheon.

The people of the Paraja tribe worship several gods, deities, and ancestors. They believe that the Creators are the dispenser of life and death, joys and woes. The Paraja worship gods and goddesses for their healthy being. For the Paraja people, Dharmu is the primary god. The others are the earth goddess- Basumati, the god for all seasons-Jhakar, and the tiger god-BaghDebta. Dead ancestors receive regular worship and sacrifices on various religious occasions. DadiBudha is the soul of their first ancestor, keeping a graceful watch over their life. They observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and show around the year to appease their deities and ancestors and for their enjoyment. Animals and fowls are also sacrificed on such occasions.

In the novel, when the protagonist Sukru Jani senses the coming adversity, he prays to the Gods as he says

"Lord Jhakar the All-Pervading One and Nisani Munda the Earth-Goddess: 'Let no evil befall me O Mighty Ones, and I will sacrifice pigeons and fowls before your holy altar.'"

The Paraja has a firm belief in their gods, and according to them, their Gods can never betray them. They sacrifice hens, pigeons, and fowls to appease their ancestors. In December, the tribe observes one of their significant festivals to mark the gathering of the harvest, with the rituals of dance and sacrifice to the Earth-Goddess.

The practice starts with killing the black rooster with fresh blood pouring onto the earth and some liquor made of mahua flowers. This is the libation of the Earth-Goddess.

Their prominent religious functionaries are Jani- the priest; Disary- the astrologer; Gurumai- the female shamanin and Chalan- the messenger. Their major festivals during the year are bihanpuja during Baisakh, mandiarani, baghrajau, ladu chapu (new eating of mango kernel during Asadh), chitalagi, kendumunda topi during Sravan, bhad baduani in the month of Bhod, dassera during Aswin, Diwali during Kartik, anakakara (to make new gourd spoon for offering wine to procure Piri grass for house thatching) during Margasira, pus parab during Pus, jakeri puja in Magh, kandul bhaja (new eating of kandul) during Phagun and chait parab in the month of Chaitra.

The Paraja and Kondh tribes both have their communication system with the supernatural. They have their astrologers, who can read the stars and know the most suitable times for the marriages. They even can forecast rain and drought and warn the tribes of evil days. The Disari performs the duty of future telling from the almanacs.

For the Paraja, the Disari is all-knowing. He can tell the prospects of agriculture in a particular year or an auspicious day to start a journey. And Disari can communicate with the spirits of the ancestors. The Disari uses a medium known as a Beju, possessed by an ancestral spirit of a tribal God or goddess, and temporarily acquires supernatural powers of prophecy. He decides when to start Spring Festival and the sacrificial ceremony undertaken by the tribespeople. The Gods have their shrine in a deep valley surrounded by hills with thick forest. The villagers must walk in procession to the god's shrine, singing:

"O God of joy, God of dance and song,
God of the hunt,
Come, make us gay.
Be our guest;
Drink the liquor we have brewed for you,
Accept the fowl and chicken that we offer.
Then, when the few days of the feast are spent,
You may return to your home.
Only come, come, come."

When the tribes' people reached there, they smeared the tree trunk with the sacred vermilion. They sacrifice pigeons and fowl to their deities.

The birth of a child sends the signal of the arrival of the deceased person's spirit in the house. They consider the coming of a child as the rebirth of one of their ancestors. Therefore, the newborn is always given a warm welcome. In a Paraja community, from conception to the final purificatory rituals, the concerned women observe several taboos (restrictions). A pregnant woman is subjected to many taboos (restrictions) concerning her diet and daily activities for her well-being and safe delivery. A Gurumai not only performs rituals for smooth delivery, but she is a priest whose duty is to worship the village goddess on the occasion of rituals, festivals and for the recovery of ailing persons.

The month of Aswina is a special one for the Paraja community, as described in the novel. According to the Paraja people, this is the month when the Mother goddess, Durga, takes up her sword to do battle with evil. During this month, the soothsayers and the witch-doctors, the kalisis and shamans, possessed by the deity, danced wildly. They also sacrifice buffalos as an offering to the goddess Kali. It's a common practice among the Paraja tribe.

One night when Sukru Jani was gazing at the stars, he was thinking of Dharmu- their supreme god. Dharmu is described as;

"...Dharmu, the just one. Dharmu saw everything, but he never showed himself; he saw everything, but he never spoke out-he was as silent as Pandramali mountains, above whose crest shone a particular bright seasonal star suffering left the god unmoved, but if he did not receive his sacrifice of goats and pigeons his anger could be swift and terrible."

The Paraja people believe that if a man has done something wrong at last birth, Dharmu will kill him quickly. So Sombari, was taken away so soon because of her sinful deeds in the previous birth-Sukru Jani thought.

Conclusion

The religious practices and rituals collectively play an essential role in the lives of the tribal people. In the novel, Gopinath Mohanty highlights the various aspects of the Paraja religion and their tradition through the tragic story of Sukru Jani. Mohanty, however, does not merely narrate a tale of suffering. On the contrary, it is a tale of survival. Despite the decline in the fortunes of Sukru Jani and his family, we as readers admire tribal traditions and rituals and their never-say-die attitude to life. The novel bears an unmistakable Indian identity as the writer graphically delineates every detail of the characters' physical landscape and social background. Yet, the story is essentially culture-specific as it transcends the barriers of time and space and has universal appeal.

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