

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE KORA TRIBES OF WEST BENGAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

Animism is a common phenomenon among the tribes. Therefore, the religious beliefs and its performances among the tribes consist of their life cycle rites, communal rites and worship practices along with their ancestral worship practices followed by their different totem and taboos. The tribes in India have been influenced by certain traditions of the communities around them. Major neighboring community in all the areas has always been Hindus. As a result from the very period there have been several points of contact between the Hindus of the area and tribal communities living within it. The nature and extent of contact the pattern of mutual participation and characteristics of revitalization movements have been different in different parts of India. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the religious beliefs and practices among the Kora tribes in West Bengal.

Key words: Kora tribes, Religious beliefs and practices, West Bengal

1.INTRODUCTION:

The religious beliefs and practices evolved as the innate intuition of regulation against the adverse environmental conditions prevails and every corner of the habitat. Usually the ecological factors and happening beyond the controlling capacity of mankind and thought (Singh, 1986). Animism is a

common phenomenon among the tribes. Therefore, the religious beliefs and its performances among the tribes consist of their life cycle rites, communal rites, and worship practices along with their ancestral worship practices followed by their different totem and taboos. Tribal people's beliefs in Gods and Goddess, witchcraft, magic and disaster is attributed to annoyance and malevolent acts of the mystic forces, malicious spirits. Although, anthropological approaches of tribal religion and appreciation of understanding it through the customs and beliefs and practices in natural objectives associated with the social parts of culture and society. The form of religious practices by the tribal people in India was regarded as 'Animism' until the middle of the century.

According to the constitution of India (Scheduled Tribes orders) second amendment Bill; 2011 – "Tribal follow some specific criterion like having primitive traits, distributive culture geographical isolation, shyness at contact with the community at large and backwardness. In general usage, the word "tribe" is taken to denote a primary aggregate of peoples living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief.

Recent research in cultural and structural anthropology has consequently abandoned the holistic search for origins and has applied the comparative method to the functional analysis of Tribal. When tribal men move out of their native society to join, however peripherally, a larger multitribal or plural society, the tribal identity that they carry with them is that of their tribal society as a whole, irrespective of whether or not it originally represented a single political unit. An interesting example is provided by the Luapula kingdom of Kazembe in central Africa studied by Cunnison (1960). Anthropologists have differed on the question relating to tribe and caste. According to Ghurye tribal people are backward Hindus differing only in degrees from the other segments of Hindu society. Elwin argued for the recognition of the separate social and cultural identity of tribal people. The government of India gives tacit recognition to this identity of keeping alive under the constitution sanction their lists of Scheduled Tribe. According to Andre Beteille, there are certain commonly observed differences between tribes and castes. The tribes are relatively isolated as to the castes. They are a world within itself having few externalities. Tribes speak a variety of dialects that separates them from non-tribes. They follow their own religion and practices which are not common in Hinduism. Language is a criterion of difference as tribes speak their local dialect-for example Mundas and Oraons of Chota Nagpur speak different dialects but Bhumij has lost their tribal dialect and speaks the dominant language of the area. According to N.K Bose, there are many similarities in customs between tribes and castes and they are interdependent. Marriage within the clan is forbidden both in the tribe as well as in the caste. Both generally don't encourage marriage

outside the group. According to Herbert Risley, the convention of endogamy is not rigidly enforced in the tribe whereas such is the case in a caste. But this view is not acceptable since the law of endogamy is enforced with extreme rigidity in some tribes. Max Weber writes in *Social Structure* that when an Indian tribe loses its territorial significance it assumes the form of an Indian caste. In this way, a tribe is a local group whereas caste is a social group. According to D.N. Majumdar, the tribe looks upon Hindu ritualism as foreign and extra-religious even though indulging in it and the in the worship of God and Goddess whereas in the caste these are a necessary part of the religion. In caste individuals generally pursue their own definite occupations because functions are divided under the caste system. In the tribe, individuals can indulge in whatever profession they prefer as there is no fixed relation between them and occupation. According to Bailey tribe and caste should be viewed as a continuum. He seeks to make a distinction not in terms of the totality of behavior but in a more limited way to the political-economic system. Briefly, Bailey argues that a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is segmentary and egalitarian. But in contemporary India, both caste and tribe are being merged into a different system which is neither one nor the other.

The tribes in India have been influenced by certain traditions of the communities around them. The major neighboring community in all the areas has always been Hindus. As a result of the very period, there have been several points of contact between the Hindus of the area and tribal communities living within it. The nature and extent of contact the pattern of mutual participation and characteristics of revitalization movements have been different in different parts of India.

The ethnographic records establish that the contacts varied from semi-isolation to complete assimilation. The numerous castes among Hindus have emerged out of the tribal strata. The recent studies of tribes of Himalayan western and middle India have left no doubt that some of the tribes are Hinduized to the extent that they have been assimilated with the different castes at different levels in the caste system.

As per the Indian constitution order (1950), the KORA community had placed of the twentieth number in West Bengal scheduled tribes' list. Kora is a small tribal community in eastern India i.e. in West Bengal. Kora has their habitats all over the West Bengal especially in Paschim Midnapur, Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum, Paschim Burdhaman, and Hoogly. Besides West Bengal kora tribes are also located in the Indian state of Bihar and Jharkhand. The kora also known as 'Khora' or 'Cora' was are at the can indigenous tribes at the great Andaman's people, originally living on the eastern part at north, Andaman Island (George Weber, 2009). As per the 2001 census

Report, total population at Kora community was 142,789, which was 3.2 percentages at the total scheduled tribes' population in West Bengal.

The word 'KORA' has got a significant meaning. It signifies earth digging. So it becomes quite obvious that the profession that this kora is related to cultivation. "The caste, kora believes tank digging, road making and earthwork generally to be their characteristics. Profession and it may be surmised that their adoption of a comparatively degraded occupations, necessarily involving a more or less wondering Manner of life may be the cause which led to their separation from the Mundas, who are above all things settled agriculturists, conspicuous for their attachment to their original villages" (Risley: 1891, 506-507). In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the religious beliefs and practices among the Kora tribes in West Bengal.

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are given below:

- § To know the religious beliefs and practices among the Kora tribal population in West Bengal.
- § To enquire about the effect of Hinduism on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted among the Kora tribes, residing in different districts namely, Bankura, Puruliya, and PaschimMedinipur of West Bengal by adopting the ethnographic methodology. We have taken an in-depth interview of Kora peoples who belong to different age groups and sex from the above-stated districts of West Bengal on the basis of the objectives of this study by adopting purposive sampling method.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

At first we cited some statements of Kora people on their religious beliefs and practices at present days evolved from the in-depth interview with them during our field study.

Interview 01 Debnath Kora (name changed due to protect his privacy), age about 75 years old, residing at Mohan Gara village of Bankura district told us that at present Kora people has been enjoying *kali puja* and *mansa puja* which are also known as Hindu deities. The new generation of kora people are attending marriage ceremonies or other religious festivals of Hindu community but it is not too much. They are also inviting other caste people in their programs. He also said to us that the myth of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in the Hindu religion has been accepted by their community people. They have also worshipped their traditional God and Goddess like *Garam-thakur*, *Bonga-buru*, *Vogoban*, etc. by their priests.

Interview 02: Sunaram Mudi (name changed due to protect his privacy), age about 46 years old, residing at Chakdoba village of Purulia district told us that presently they have been enjoying Hindus' *kali puja* and *Durga puja* along with their traditional religious festivals. They have been using Casio with their traditional instrument. Some influenced people from their community had got married to some higher caste women but they did not live their own village. Some Kora people have been living in an urban area but they are not involving actively in their traditional festival.

Interview 03: Nalini Kora (name changed due to protect her privacy), age about 48 years old, residing at Bamandangavillage of Paschim Medinipur district told us that Kora traditional culture has been present here but it has been more affected by Hindus' culture. They have using band party their marriage ceremony and inviting others caste. They have adopted some rituals from Hindus like *Pindda-dan*, *Sad-vokkhan*, etc. Kora peoples have also knowing the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Interview 04: SagenMudi (name changed due to protect his privacy), age about 35 years old, residing at Nipania village of Purulia district told us that Kora community give place to the services of Brahmin priests and Vaishnava Guru. In this village also interesting to note that the impact of Sadhus on the life of the Kora has already crept in. After taking sacred initiation (*diksha*) from the Vaishnava religious preceptor, a fraction of the Kora community has started a holy life by refraining themselves from killing of animals and by keeping themselves aloof from all earthly affairs. They sing *nam-gan* of Lord *Hari* to get mukti (liberation) from the earthly sufferings. He also told us that, according to the advice of the *guru*, they practice

the art of withholding the discharge of semen at the time of sexual intercourse. This ritual is connected in Hinduism.

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices Performed by the Koras:

Now we discussed about their traditional religious god and goddess along with their beliefs and practices:

Bakken Kali Bonga: One of the most important deities of the Koras is *Aakken Kali*. It also regarded as the deity of the village, *gram-debota*. The Koras of West Bengal are believed to be originated from the Modis of Chhotonagpur. *Aakken Kali* is originally the supreme deity of the Modi and now it is a popular festival of them. *Aakken Kali* is worshipped on the first day of Bengali month *Magh*. At first the worship is performed outside the village beneath a *pakur* tree where a mud-built square-shaped platform is prepared. Before worship, the platform is mopped with cow dung solution. This ritual is performed by the priests of their, popularly known as *Degharia*. He uses sacred thread like Hindu Brahmin only during the worship. The Kora males and females observed fast from the morning till the end of the puja. Few pieces of Mango leaf, leaf of neem (*Azadirachta indica*) tree, flowers, incense sticks, dhuno (resin) are used for the worship. They offer different types of fruits like banana, lemons, white potatoes, *atapchal* (sunned rice), flattened rice, sweets, and cow milk also. Generally, two Brahmins are selected to perform the puja. At first, they assemble the fruits on the brass dish and fetch some water in an earthen pot from the river and keep it just in front of the platform. They keep *atapchal* on the earthen pot and some sweets (*batasa*) are kept on it. When the sweets fell down from the *atapchal* they think that their puja is successful and the spirit is pleased with them. Then goat, fowl or duck are sacrificed at a little distant from the sacred platform. The whole village shares the expenditure equally. It is interestingly noted here that the neighboring Hindu people are also participating in their puja actively. They make different types of offerings with due respect. Not only that they also give animals for sacrifice like he-goat, duck, cock, very often they promise the deity to sacrifice for having a son, for a good crop or for passing the examination. After the end of the puja, they distribute the fruits and flattened rice among the villagers and then return back. *Haria* (one kind of country liquor is made by fermentation of rice) is being prepared by some villagers. The meat of the sacrificed animals is cooked than by the females but they are strictly prohibited to eat the head of the animals. After drinking *Haria* with meat they start their traditional group dancing and singing since the stock of *haria* is over.

Henda-a-Giddhi: Generally the *Henda-a Gidi* is worshipped in every family twice in a year, one on the last date of *Jaistha* and other on the last date of *Agrahayana* of the Bengali month. Every family worships in their own family. The host family invites a male member as a priest from any clan group other than of his own. It has no image or idol. On the day of worship the elder male and female member of the family fast until the puja is over. At first the place of worship is smeared with cow dung solution. Then they draw six squares by sunned rice powder. The squares are filled up with cow dung, few pieces of small grain coals and burnt mud. The black fowl is sacrificed and drop few blood into the squares. They do not utter any mantras but repeatedly remember their fore fathers name. After the end of the puja they cook the meat of the sacrificed fowl mixed with rice and take it as Prasad. The head of the fowl is burnt separately and only the male members can take it. After eating *Prasad*, all the villagers assemble at a common place where country liquor is ready to serve. Then all day long they drink, sing and dance in groups with their musical instruments like *madal*, *flute*, *aktara*, etc.

Bonga-Buru: Worship of *Bonga-Buru*, ‘the spirit of hill’ is one of the most important festivals among the Kora tribe of West Bengal, generally performed on the last day of Bengali month of *Chitra* i.e. the day of *Chaitra Sankranti*. It is also known as *Hompuja*. As they believe that one day their ancestors lived in the hilly area of Chhotonagpur, so they pay respect to their homeland and hope that if the spirit is pleased they will be happy, prosperous, and secured in life and the production of crops will be maximized. At first, the spirit is worshipped in a place far away from the village boundary. The place is mopped with a cow dung solution. The priest takes a thread (*AloSuto* – the thread of light) dipped into the mixture of oil and turmeric and put on across his body. He draws two figures, one of the sun and other of the moon. Now three cakes are offered to the sun and three to the moon. These cakes are made by the housewives with sunned rice and mustard oil. Two cocks are fed sunned rice and then sacrificed to the sun and the moon. Its meat is distributed among each and every member of the village present there. After this, a glass of *Haria* is poured on the mopped place in the name of the spirit Buru. Now the place is rubbed with water only. A big stone with some thorns is placed there so that dog or any other animal cannot step on the place. *Bonga Buru* is also worshipped either inside the house or under the cowshed to keep the cattle in good health. At first, the cowsheds are cleaned with brooms and then mopped with cow dung solution. Some twigs of *Pakur* (banyan) are

daubed with oil and turmeric solutions are kept on the mopped place in three vertical rows. In each row, four leaves are placed. The cakes which they have prepared with sunned rice and mustard oil, are broken each one into three pieces and placed on each leaf. Now a big plate with full of rice is kept before these leaves by the eldest member of the family. The rice is fed to a red cock (*katari*). After feeding a little the worshipper sacrificed the cock with a blow on the plate in such a manner that the blood of the bird drenches the rice. The blood-soaked rice now becomes Prasad. It is cooked and distributed among the members of the family. After taking the Prasad, every family member washed his/her hands with water and then takes mustard oil to apply over his/her face. It is specifically mentioned here that after the worship of *Bonga-Buru* the Koras are sanctioned to start the preparation of their cultivable lands.

Soso-Giddi: Basically this is a worship of the Koras ancestral spirits. Interestingly, they use the term *Satyanarayan*, one of the most familiar god, worshiped by the Hindus very synonymously. Generally, the worship is performed just before sowing seeds in the Bengali month of *Jaistha* and also before harvesting in the month of *Agrahayan*. They also organize the worship personally after marriage ceremony, or after first rice eating ceremony (*anyaprasan*). The priest is employed from any other clan group besides of his own. *Soso-giddipuja* acts like a bridge between their faiths towards the orthodox Hindu religion and their traditional belief system. The Kora religion originated from the Munda religion and during this worship presence of the Munda people is must. When they could not find the Munda, they select the Munda from their own Kora society. After the end of the puja they should give *Haria* to the Munda and the priest. On the day of the worship some adult male members take bath in the river and then enter into a room and close the door. Then the priest asks them about their identity. They reply that they came there for some work and tell their surname as 'Modi'. Then they are allowed to participate in the worship. Their conversation should be in the Munda language. In this way, Koras convert themselves to a Munda. When *soso-giddi* is worshipped before sowing seed they also try to please all the spirits of animals connected with the paddy field. Not only that the spirit of the sun and the moon are also venerated to give proper protection.

Sona Giddi and Rupo Giddi: *SonaGiddi*, the spirit of gold and the *RupoGiddi*, the spirit of silver are worshipped at the same time as a symbol of wealth. The puja is performed at

a place inside the boundary of the village. The place is cleaned and mopped with cow dung solution. With the help of the Mundas, the priest draws a big rectangular room which is separated by a middle line keeping a broad opening for the spirit to move inside the rooms without any obstruction. *Sona Giddi* and *Rupo Giddi* are placed together in the right part of the rectangular figure with a belief to get extra protection for the paddy crop. On the left side of the figure, the sun is drawn which symbolizes as a controller of both day and night. The moon is drawn outside the room as it is less powerful than the sun as it controls the night only. The priest keeps two cakes of sunned rice one in each compartments indicating the presence of two spirits there. Now small circles are drawn both on the right and the left side of this room. Three circles are on the left whereas five are on the right. The three circles represent the Crow, Cuckoo and the Drongo from bottom to top respectively and the five circles represent the fox, jackal, dog and centipede in the same order. A palm is also drawn below the room where after praising each animal a pinch of sunned dried rice is put. The worship starts with the praising of the Drongo because it causes awake the people from bed by making the whistling sound. Next, the cuckoo, as it gives alarm that the dawn is at the door. This follows the worship of the crow because it cries to show the morning – the right time to go to the field. The animals, here are praise to make quiet so that they won't harm the people in the field. These are the fox, jackal, dog, scorpion and centipede. The dog has a better position because it also watches in the fields. Now the sun and the moon are praised requesting to control the weather in such a way that the farmers do not have to face many hazards in agriculture. The priest continuously praises the sun requesting not to cause drought so that they enjoy a nice shower during the rainy season. At the same time, the sun is believed to control the flood with the help of the moon. In the end, *Sona-giddi* and the *Rupo-giddi* are remembered as they are believed to give additional protection to the Kora in coordination with the sun and the moon respectively. They believe as the *Sona*, i.e. the gold, is yellow in color, it has a close association with the sun and since the color of the *Rupo*, i.e. the silver is white, it is closely associated with the moon. They pray deeply for a rich production. This follows the presentation of a small mound of rising on the figure of palm and offers a cock to the giddi. After the ritual is over, the items offered are taken as Prasad i.e. the sunned rice kept on the palm. The cooked meat of the sacrificed cock is now distributed among the villagers. They believe it provide them strength to be laborious agriculturists. The worship of *soso-giddi* when performed before sowing seeds is followed

by *muth puja*, propitiation of corn spirit. Before scattering the seeds, a handful of paddy is brought in contact with the agricultural fields and ceremonially back home by the cultivator. The sacred grains being placed on a winnowing fan are worshiped at home by the senior male members of the family by the application of vermilion and the offering of fruits and sweets. No one dare to start sowing operation without performing this ritual. Before harvesting, another ritual known as “*janthal*” is observed by way of giving thanks to the corn spirit for a good harvest. On that occasion fowls are sacrificed on paddy fields. Another item being dedicated to the deity is the new paddy crop.

4. CONCLUSION

From our discussion in this paper, we can safely state that the Kora tribe of West Bengal satisfy to certain extent the fourth proposition of Risley. They aspire for a higher and secure status in the regional Hindu caste hierarchy. They have taken up certain ‘*sanskritic*’ rituals as well as participate actively in the worship of the Hindu deities. A recent trend can also be marked that the literate section among this community people finds it more convenient to leave the bulk of their Kora brethren behind and to aspire for appreciation as Hindus. Though, side by side a large section of Kora tribes retain independent religious rites yet, which are quite free from Hindu influence.

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