

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 53

Tribal Traditions and Performances II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. Today we are going to discuss about the tribal traditions and performances. This is in continuation from our previous lecture. We were talking mainly about the Santhal community, right. So the Santhals' spiritual beliefs are deeply interwoven with nature and natural aspects, the natural forces. The Santhal believes that the human psyche alters or changes according to the climatic changes, right.

So for example, the motherland or the earth also called as dharti mai by the Santhals is believed as or imagined as a female benevolent spirit who is revered by the entire community, and she is responsible for agricultural productions. So we will see that the Santal rituals and worships are also very much incumbent on the question of survival. They are doing a lot of.. they are mainly people living in the villages, they are agrobased community and most of the rituals that they offer to this, you know, the spirits are, cannot be really divorced from the pragmatic ends, the question of survival. So they are very much, the rituals and their belief system is very much rooted to their geographical existence, their natural, you know, existence, the food crops and the cash crops that they grew, their clothing, their familial structure.. so their familial structure and so on.

So we see that Santhals are basically a very performative people and their birth, death, their weddings, ceremonies, their nuptials, everything. So we see that the Santhal are very performative people just like other tribal communities and their birth, their nuptial ceremonies and their death ceremonies and mourning are all centered on bodily performances, right. So coming back to the concept of dharti mai, just because they are, you know, are agrobased community, the onus is on, you know, rituals and worship that appease the land, that worship the land and cattle are at the heart of their religion and spirituality. Jaher Era or the lady of the sacred grove who is invoked for the goodness, for the overall, you know, happiness and prosperity of the villages and their cattle and crops is imagined as a benevolent and good-willing mother and Jaher Era or Jaher Buri is

concerned about the bodily needs of the Santhal just like mother earth who produces, you know, yields crops to feed us, right. That is the idea of or imagination of Jaher Era, benevolent old woman, ancient woman.

So the Jaher Era is represented by a groove, the Gosai Era is installed under a Mahua tree and the Pargana bonga is installed under a Sal tree. All these different spirits are associated with some kind of vegetation, either it is a groove or the Mahua and the Sal tree, two trees that find a lot of importance in Santhal spirituality epitomize the ritual unity and social solidarity of the people, the tribal people and the solidarity of their village. So we see that at the heart of the tribal religions, many of the tribal religions lie the philosophy of conservation of nature, they are nature worshippers. They do not, ideally and typically they do not worship icons and idols. For them the Sal tree, the Mahua tree and different other, you know, groves and vegetation represent the spirits and the deities and they conserve these, you know, vegetation. So, the spirits also called the bongas are represented through tactile objects of nature.

So we have to understand that the concept of animism that informs tribal religions or the religions of the tribal people are not so much about esoteric and abstract ideas. They are very much, you know, rooted to the matter and material objects, to the tactile and palpable objects of nature. It could be a carved wooden post or a stone, it could be the trees and the birds. So something that are, things that are sensory, that are, you know, available to our five senses and can be felt and understood, you know, by and can be felt and understood by ephemeral beings. So apart from the spirits and deities, so spirits are also believed to be present in natural objects such as the twisted bamboo shoots, the tree roots, some unusually shaped hills and even the waterfalls.

These are also considered as different spirits and different, you know, oral stories and myths and lores are associated with each of these hills and waterfalls and some of the trees and so on. So each village has its own, you know, collective memory, collective, you know, faith and beliefs through these stories. So though not all of these spirits are worshipped, they need to be appeased or exercised with the help of the shamans or spirits. The santal ensures his field's, his agricultural field's prosperity through planting some of these, you know, vegetations like belva and mahadeva jata in the middle of the paddy fields. So these plants also have their spiritual values or spiritual connotations.

And then they have an occasion called bandai where they are propitiating the cattle by washing the cattle's feet with raw milk and water and then smearing the horns of the cows with oils and offering, you know, sacrifices to deities for the well-being of the animals. So animals in a household, the cattle in a household are also like family because they sustain their existence, they help in agriculture and they are very worthy to the Santal, you know, life and living. So during the Jantal festival, the bongas are worshipped for the first fruits. So the spirits are worshipped and appeased so the trees bear the fruits in abundance and no one is left hungry, right. So the Santal also believes in tree or jungle spirits considered as the spirits of the ancestors, whose ghosts were not ritually brought back to the house because of some abnormal circumstances of death.

So, naturally the Santals have the practice of bringing back the spirits of their ancestors and keeping them in one corner of their house. It is called the bhithar, right. In the bhithar of their house, the spirits of their ancestors known as burha and burhi are kept, right. So the boundary spirits such as Sima bonga are made, are given offerings in order to prevent any kind of drought or failure of crops. Similarly, the Kisar bonga is thought to cause disease; not all of these bongas or spirits are positive, some of them like the Kisar bonga can be a disease-causing spirit and if one cannot get rid of the spirit in time, it can eat up, it is believed to have the capacity of eating up an entire household or eradicating, destroying an entire household.

So that is how much negative a spirit can be. So one of the bongas known as the Rongo Ruji manifests some obscene desire for sex and it demands to be entertained with obscene songs and stories. So these bongas are very anthropomorphic, they have their anger, their vengeance, vindictive nature, their erotic desires, their jealousy and rivalry. They are not very much above the human beings and humans rather than worshipping them are constantly appeasing them, Santals constantly propitiating them. The Santals respect for the larger ecological system is understood from a ritual called the Dimtang puja. Dimtang puja which entails construction of a symbolic cattle shed with salwood and leaves and inside the structure, images of cattle are kept on heaps of newly harvested rice, right.

So further we see that the Santal's you know gratitude or thankfulness and regard for the soul of animals is perceived from the act that they do not touch any creature with their feet because these animals are sources of food. They are either you know sacrificed, hunted and eaten, or they are source of dairy products, so they do not touch any creature with feet lest its spirit be angered. Similarly in hunting the principal claimant of any hunted game is the one who hits it first. However, it is the duty of the hunter to offer a

small portion of this game or the meat of the hunted animal to the deities and also share the hunt with other village members and so the hunter, the person that kills a game can only keep a certain part to himself. This also subscribes to or hearkens back the community-centric nature of the Santal society, where the santal people.. where there is no individual above the community.

If there is an animal hunted, the soul of the animal is kind of.. people offer prayers to the soul of the animal for sacrificing itself for human sustenance and then the animal is shared among you know different members of the village. It is never enjoyed alone. The santal believes in transmigration of souls and being hunter gatherer as well as an agro-based settler.. So, a santal is both, he can be a hunter gatherer as well as an agro-based settler.. So, the santals value crops and fields as much as the forests.

In fact, the santal sees hunting as a spiritual exercise, which is done under the guidance of the hunting priest, the hunting priest called known as the dihri. The dihri who acts as the spiritual and secular leader of a hunt. This dihri, the hunting priest decides the day for commencing a hunt and the places where the hunters are supposed to spend their nights as well as arbiters the disputes centering a claim of a game. So, if there is a dispute regarding who can claim how much share of a hunted animal, such a dispute is arbitered and mediated by the dihri.

So, for the santal it is never desirable to challenge the nature, right. They are never anti-nature, they are an extension and basically a friend sharing a complementary relationship with the nature. So, they never cut or throw stones at trees, you know, they never hurt a sleeping animal, they never hunt a sleeping animal. The trees, a trees for example, that have fallen in a Sarna cannot be taken away without the permission of the Pahan or the head, and sacrifices have to be made before removing a tree from the Sarna. Even if the tree has died and fallen, there needs to be certain rituals that are enacted before such a tree is removed from the Sarna, otherwise the spirits around the Sarna might be, you know, enraged.

So, we also see that the Santal rears domestic animals as one's own children and they inherit these cows and their calves as valuable assets. They never deprive a calf of its mother's milk immediately after its birth, otherwise they believe that the calf or the offspring can curse the householder, the householder will incur some kind of, you know,

negativity, something bad will happen if the offspring is separated from the mother immediately after the birth. So, the Santal's understanding of religiosity relies on tactility and sensory manifestations of the crisis and the cure. Rather than the abstract, the emphasis is more on the matter and material, you know, objects both animate and inanimate. So, animal paintings are used for rituals and are believed to dispel all kinds of evil forces.

There is a festival called Tolopuja which is an instance of how graphic and vivid paintings play an important role in Santali rituals. So, in Tolopuja one sees that a five petalled flower is drawn on the ground with powdered charcoal and powder of earth and rice flour, right. So, it is a very colourful large five petalled flower drawn on the ground. At the centre is the figure of a fowl. This illustration is then dedicated to the great spirit or Ponomosar also known as Thakurjiu, in order to obtain protection from different forms of negativity.

It could be Najrahi or Evil Eye, Dhithahi or Malice and Kobodh Ondi or Prickly Weeds to let all negativity, you know, be shunned from the household or from the village and so the village can prosper and live peacefully. So, in the words of W. G. Archer, I quote, "whether it is a time of drinking rice beer, eating a meal, celebrating a festival, a birth or a wedding or placating the bongas, the recent dead must be given their small offering," (unquote).

So, at the beginning of every festival some rice cakes or some other offerings, usually it is rice cakes and Hariya or the rice beer that is offered to the ancestors of a household. They are called Budha and Budhi. Their spirits are believed to be living in one corner of the Bhitar or the inside domain. It could be a corner of the kitchen. So, although the bodily existence perishes, the soul lives on in the household and they need to be given a small offering at the beginning of any, you know, pious ceremony, any festival.

So, ancestor worship and, you know, regards and respect for and commemoration of ancestors play a very important role in the tribal religions. They can never dissociate themselves or their identities from their, you know, dead ancestors, right. The ancestors are believed to be on an equal level as the demigods or spirits, they become the bongas, right. So, the process of ancestor worship enables uniting the community of the present

living individuals with that of the people who lived in the past. It is also a way of connecting the past with the present, right.

And that is where the Santhal is deriving his identity from, his identity I repeat again and again is never an individualistic or an individual identity. It is, you know, it emerges through a gratitude, it emerges through a sense of thankfulness to other natural beings, to animals, to spirits of ancestors, to the bongas and ultimately through, you know, a manifestation and expression of respect towards the Thakurjiu or the Great being, the highest form of God. So, we see that this connection with the ancestors makes it difficult to make a clear demarcation between the palpable or material self and the spiritual self or that of the living and the deceased, right. The Santal community's belief system looks at the ethereal existence or the afterlife as a continuance of the ephemeral form. They believe that the body has died, but the spirit of the fathers and grandfathers and grandmothers are somewhere existing in the bhitar of their household.

When we talk of a funeral feast called Bhandan, we see that the Majhi and the Jog Majhi, you know, village headman recites the traditional creation story or the Karam Binti. Similar Santal stories of creation and migration are narrated by, usually by the village elder in the evenings of the Sim Bonga and the Marangburu festivals. So, these festivals are very performative in nature. They are full of songs, dances and storytelling, telling of the myths. And through storytelling what is happening? we are connecting with the younger generation.

The Santhal, the tribal, you know, communities connect with the younger generation. They are passing on their knowledge system orally and that is also a way of not forgetting one's roots. So, through telling the story there is a commemoration of the past heroes or the past, you know, ancestors and spirits and so, through, through memorialization, through remembrance, the past is never let to die. Storytelling is a way of, you know, holding the community, bracing the community, binding the community together. So, through telling story during the Bhandan ceremony, one is trying to connect between the immediate dead and the ancestors.

And apart from a collective or a shared ritual of lamentation, the indigenous groups or the tribal groups bathe and anoint the dead with oil and turmeric powder and then the dead is given some coins, ornaments and utensils to the grave or to the, to the pyre, right,

to their cremation. So, this implies that one's social personality is not annihilated, but rather transformed with death, pointing to the principle of immortality that transforms the soul as a, or into a demi-god or bonga. So, it is not a very unilinear life journey, it is rather a, where life ends at death, you know, after death there is a perception, there is a belief in a life that follows when the mortal body is left behind the ancestors, the deceased continue to live on a different plane as a demi-god or spirit. And this plane is not very far away, it is on an exchangeable relationship, you know, it is on an exchangeable relationship with that of the living or the mortals. I will stop my lecture here today and let us continue with the discussion in our ensuing lectures. Thank you.