

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 57**

### **Tribal Traditions and Performances VI**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. Today we are going to conclude our module on tribal traditions and performances. So, this is going to be our last lecture from this module. We will just hearken back and summarize some of the points that we have discussed in our previous lectures in this module. So, the collective public worship is something that we have tried to understand through the mentioning of a number of different festivals that the Santhals observe and celebrate throughout the year. So, the festivals of the tribe primarily are meant to provide a sense of fellow feeling with the demigods, with the bongas or spirits.

And this can be seen through the invocation, through their prayers and offerings that are made to the spirits. As the whole village is involved in these festivities or these festival rituals, it symbolizes, the rituals symbolize the tribal people's alliance and the tribal people's identity emerging as a collective, as a group of people, as a community. So, the concept of individual being is not present among the tribals. J. Troisi states and I quote, "The sacred places namely, the jaherthan, manjhithan and bhitar where these rituals are celebrated, as well as the sheds erected during the Baha festival, the possession by Maran Buru, Jaher Era and Moreko-Turuiko, and the sacred altar(khond) indicate a sense of special presence of the spirits and of their intervention", their intervention in the everyday life in the mundane activities of the Santhal people.

So, community solidarity is manifested through feasting, dancing, singing, merry making, you know, drinking, mutual visits to each other's houses and exchange of gifts. So, the whole village comes together for the celebration, the joy experienced by people is not only on an individual level and in fact, it is not at all on the individual level, but rather at the level of the community, right, as a collective people they enjoy. So, collective public worship gives people a mutual stimulation. In the words of Troisi, it also "enhances meanings of the Santal's complex and varied lives. They become conscious of their unity and at the same time dependence on their spirits."

So, these interdependence relationships, human's dependence on nature, human's dependence on deities, human's dependence on the ancestors spirits, all of these dependences form a lattice, a network that defines the Santal's existence. These festivals without their religious element would lose their core significance and character. So, the rituals are a part of the different festivals of the Santal's techniques for entering into continuing and reasserting social relationships with the invisible world. So, these are what Troisi calls as social religions, religions that are very much intrinsic to and that are very much rooted to the social needs, the social considerations. The rituals are the expression of the community's identity and are also symbolic of the peace or the treaty that they have with nature.

The tribal communities never try to infringe or transgress the natural law; whatever they do is within the ambit of natural law. So, Baha festival symbolizes new life or the blossoming of nature, blossoming of flowers, it is called a flower festival and it is celebrated during the spring season. Sohrae and Jantar festivals are symbolic of new life and abundance. So, the newness emanating from these festivities also extends to the surroundings, such as one can find through activities like whitewashing of houses and dawning of new clothes. So, I already mentioned about this when I described Baha during the Baha festival, the tribes also renovate their houses, they whitewash their houses and they repair whatever damages are present in their construction and they also have to change the utensils, they buy new sets of utensils and they have to don new clothes.

So, just like the trees have fresh leaves growing, the humans also follow the natural order in the case of the Santal community. Further, we see that storytelling, we were talking about so many of these festivals where storytelling is at the heart of the festival after you know, merrymaking. After the feast the elders start telling stories. Storytelling is an act of binding the community together. So, during occasions such as Caco Chatiar, one of the older men from the village recites the Santali account of creation, how the Santali people originated basically and also the stories of the wanderings of the Santal ancestors and the history of their settlement in the current village. So, this is a way of connecting the youth with the provenance, with the origin, with the you know, the story, the mytho-historical story associated with each village.

So, the youth are not kind of dissociated from their roots, from their identity, which is a phenomena observable especially as the younger generation has a tendency to you know,

resettle in the urban areas. So, knowing the history of each village becomes very, very important and here storytelling, the storytelling culture where the elders tell the story, the younger population listen becomes a very important activity. It is an activity associated with survival or sustenance of the identity of the Santal. Similarly, during the Bhandan ceremony, Bhandan ceremony associated with death ritual, we see the Manjhi and the Jogmanjhi of the village, the headmen of the village reciting the traditional Santal myth of origin which is known as the Karam binthi. So, they recite the Karam binthi.

Social solidarity is reflected through mundane acts of chanting and singing popular communal songs, which invoke weather conditions such as rain and sun. Now, moving on to the Gond tribe, we see that among the Gonds, Budha-deo (Bada deo) is represented by a stone and is believed to live in the Saja tree, right? Saja tree among the Gonds is considered as a sacred tree. The worship of Budha-deo takes place once in three years and begins with songs and recitations. So, one of the songs from Raipur in a nutshell when translated goes like this:

Of what is the staff made?

The staff is made of bamboo

This is the staff of god

The staff of Mother.

The cloth-flag,

Of the Desai Mother,

The Mother of the village, right? So, there is also celebration just like among the Santals; we see that the Gond's are also celebrating the figure of the mother preserver, someone that is very similar to the figure of Jaher Era or Jaher Buri, the benevolent mother, Mother Earth, right? Dharti Mai, it has different names among the different tribals coming from different regions of India, but the basic idea is a preservation of soil, of land and of forests. Here we have a video showing the Gond tribe's traditional dance.

We can see that the men are wearing their traditional clothing in the lower part of the body, they are garlanded, they have some elaborate headgear and they are playing their traditional instrument, the drums. So, during the worship of Buddha-deo, invitation is given to all the Gods through the Raipur song that has been mentioned. Men take yellow and black flags, beat the drum and men and women alike, they dance together and sing. So, through the song that I just mentioned, invitation is given to all the Gods, you know,

in Raipur, in the locality, men take yellow and black flags and they beat the drum and men and women dance and sing together. The eldest member of the family make various emblems of gods.

The women are supposed to clean the house with cow dung and leave when the deities are being worshipped. Once again, just like in the case of Santals, we see that women are abstained, women are prevented from participating in the core rituals, they have to leave home when the worship takes place. A similar role, like I said, is played by the women in the Santal tribe where they are part of preparations of the ritual, but they cannot become a part or cannot participate in the main or the core worship. Further, when sacrifices of animals are made, women are allowed to partake in the sacrificial food only after the men have eaten. So, women can eat only after the men finish their feasting.

So, this has certain gendered gradations observable among different tribal communities, such as the Santal and the Gond tribes. When the feast of Budha-deo is celebrated, no one in the village can refuse the invitation. Once again, it is a communal celebration and everyone has to take part. No distinction of caste and creed is observed during this festival and the sacrificial food is distributed to one and all. Following the feasting, men and women sing songs that are referred to, that allude to sexual or erotic excess.

So, these are licentious songs and the celebrations or the merrymaking go in very similar fashion as the Santal's Sohrae festival. During Sohrae, we talked how people can indulge in certain licentious activities, certain ribaldry and excesses only as long as the festival is going on. However, in the case of the Gond tribe, we observe that the merry-making does not form a compulsory part of the ritual. Next, we look at a tribe such as the Uralis who are agricultural workers who were mainly residents of the Cardamom hills in Kerala. So, Urali is a tribe from the Kerala region, from the southern part of India.

Like most of the tribes in southern India, the Urali worship nature as God and they believe that the nature is responsible for creating the world in which we live. So, nature is deified among the Uralis. They consider the sun as the creator of all souls and the moon as the mother of all creations. So, worshipping the sun comprises an important aspect for the Urali tribe. And music, just like in the case of other tribal communities, music forms an intrinsic part of the Urali tribe's culture, and drums and flutes comprise the main musical instruments.

The Uralis perform traditional Urali dances, you know, matching the rhythm of the music. They have very coordinated dance movements and the tribe, the entire tribe dances in a group. Worshipping the sun is something also seen among the Hindus, right? And this is something I was mentioning in my previous lecture where, you know, scholars would see that these kinds of similarities between the Hindus or the Hindu religion and the tribal communities could have, you know, different significances. It could mean that historically they have drawn on each other's cultures, they have exchanged traditions or conversely it could also mean that these practices existed independently in each of the religions, in each of the traditions. They did not draw or they did not, you know, adopt from one another, both the Hindus and the tribals would simultaneously worship the nature, worship the different inanimate objects of the nature, right? So, it can be observed that India has numerous tribes where on the one hand there are a number of differences between their languages in terms of their rituals, belief systems and, you know, their way of life, their myths and yet several similarities can also be observed among these tribal groups.

The position of women is an important element that comes to visibility while trying to understand the tribal rituals and festivities. They are very gendered in terms of their significance, and we see a constant and a conspicuous absence of the woman from the tribal rituals in all these different groups belonging to different regions of India. So, we see the absence of women from the core ritual in the case of most of the tribes belonging to the different regions of India. The harmony with nature and the feeling of unity, community-centric existence is also something that is common among the different tribals and this is expressed through the performances. The performances and the festivities actually bring out this collective, you know, existence of the tribal people.

Further, we also see that different tribes have different songs and dance forms which give a diversity of performance or through these songs and dances the community's culture, the community's emotions are captured, right? With this I am going to stop my lecture here today, and with this we also come to the end of this module. Let us meet again with a new module and another set of discussions. Thank you. Thank you.