

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 55

Tribal Traditions and Performances IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing tribal traditions and performances. So, tribals are people whose entire year comprises a number of festivals. They are a very performative existence as I was telling in the previous lecture. The entire year is defined by numerous festivals mainly celebrating, you know, sowing and harvesting of crops or you know protection of crops from evil eye, from any kind of drought and harm. So, their religion is very much you know secular in a sense; it is very much based on this-worldly or ephemeral concerns.

Some of the festivals of the Santals are Baha, Erok Sim, Hariar Sim, Iri-Gundli-Nawai, Janthar, Sohrae and Magh Sim. And all these festivals, just like I said, now are related to the agricultural operations. There are festivals related to the annual hunt as well and some festivals have no connection to agriculture, which are also not performed regularly. So, there are festivals such as the Karam puja, Jom Sim, and Mak More.

Now, J. Troisi is a scholar that has extensively studied the eastern tribes, the tribes from the eastern part of India, mainly the Khariar and the Santal people. Troisi says that it is on the occasion of collective seasonal rites and the dance and festivals associated with these rites and rituals that the Santal experiences a religious feeling. So, religious feeling derives from and is deeply interspersed with the agriculture, the question of harvest and the question of survival. Santal seasonal rites and festivals have two aspects mainly.

Religious on the one hand and the secular on the other. As the Santals are mainly agriculturalist people, their religious rites have the social urge of fertility, generation and the growth of the crops, the flourishing of their you know agriculture, the flourishing of their food harvest, their produce is connected with their own existence, right. If anything happens to their cattle and to their crops, their own existence, their own survival is also

jeopardized. So, they are a very ritualistic tribe. Today, I am going to talk mainly about the Santal people and their observances, their belief-system.

The time and place of sacrifice in a tribal community is also very important. It is crucial to the tribal people and also to the officiating person who is usually the priest, the priest also known as Naeke among the Santals. So, where the ritual will take place and how it will take place is very important to the success of the ritual, so, the desirable result can be obtained, right. We can see that the Santals are a highly ritualistic tribe and they are supposed to abide by certain norms and a fixed content of invocations.

So, instruments are a very important part of tribal performance, right. I was talking about mantra, mudra, dhvani and vyavahariki in my previous lecture, right. So, mudra pertains more to the dance forms, whereas dhvani is associated with the instruments. Drumming is crucial to the dance performances. The dancers listen to the dhvani and that is how the coordinated movements can take place.

So, dance performances happen with the thud of the drum during the festivals of the Santals. There use usually two types of drums during their dancing. One is called the tambak or kettle drum which is made of iron and it is shaped like a big bowl; and then the tumbak made of burnt clay and it is conical in shape. So, dancing is often connected with singing, right. They go hand in hand.

The Santals have different dances, different dance forms for their different festivals, and hence the song cycles also change according to the festivals. Song cycles, propitiating gods for good harvest, for good rain, for prevention of drought and so on. So, basically song cycles celebrating fertility of the land. Though most of the songs have been passed down generationally, they have been created by the ancestors many many you know years back. It is also a part, it is also an aspect of the Santal songs and poetry to be composed on the spur of the moment in order to contain, in order to reflect the immediate emotion. So, there are two things.

One are the songs that are already pre-given and there are passed down by the ancestors and on the other, there are songs and poetry being composed at the moment, on spot, which contains the emotions, the collective sentiment of the contemporary Santal people.

Now, the next festival is Sohrae. Sohrae or harvest festival is the principal public event of the Santals. It is held around December and January after the paddy has been reaped, threshed and stored. So, the rituals that are performed during Sohrae include sacrifices of fowls to the village and the ancestral spirits.

Among the many rituals that are performed on the first day of Sohrae, the girls perform what is known as the Cumaura. The Cumaura or blessing of the cows, it is a ceremony which is meant to protect the cattle from any kind of disease or even from the witch's eye, from witchcraft. So, it is the Santal's, the tribal's belief that the witches are mainly, you know, the womenfolk and their evil eye can harm the cattle, whereas the cattle are considered as a symbol of flourishing household. So, cattle are considered as a symbol of flourishing household and any evil, any anything wrong happening to the cattle means some kind of calamity for the household as well. During the Sohrae, we see celebration going on for six days together, right.

It is a six day long festival. On the last day, which is called Sakrat, a meal is cooked early after which the men go on hunting and the process, the festival of hunting, the ritual of hunting begins with the men beating the tamak, and on their way they sing various forest songs which are locally known as the bir seren, right. The bir serens are sung while going on hunting. And then the hunting, you know, venture is followed by some more rituals and a sports festival after which the men return to the village. After, you know, another round of singing and dancing which starts from the Manjhi's house, the men are offered rice beer.

Rice beer or Hariya plays a very important role in the lives of the Santhal. All performances include ablutions or propitiation of deities through offering the Hariya to the deity, and then the community also drinks rice beer together, right. The Manjhi is the headman of the village. So, all the song and dance start from Manjhi's house. The festival ends with the Jog Manjhi informing the people that the Sohrae dance has to stop and they cannot go on merry-making beyond the festival.

They are meant to be sung only during the festival. So, the ending of the Sohrae festival happens with drinking a social cleansing beer, right. Beer that is drunk together, the idea or the symbol behind this is that after drinking the beer, the people of the village have been cleansed of the liberties that they took during the festival. So, once they have taken

the cleansing beer, they cannot go on performing their excesses, the excess of song, dance and sport. They have to become more restrained and controlled, right.

All the liberties that were assumed during the Sohrae festival need to be curbed after the Jog Manjhi tells the village community to stop their merry making. So, next we talk about Baha. The Baha Parab or Baha festival is the flower festival. It celebrates the burgeoning, the blooming of flowers during spring. It is held after the full moon in the month of February-March when the Sal and the Mahua trees begin to blossom along with other vegetation.

So, the festival's feast is characterized by drinking, dancing and eating together. And just in contrast with Sohrae which is considered as a licentious festival, as a festival of excesses, Baha is said to be a righteous festival. So, during the Baha new sheds are created, the houses of the Santal people are renovated. So, we see that sheds are mainly created for the major spirits such as Marangburu and Jaher Era, right. And also there is a second shed created for Gosai Era.

This is a time of the year when the Santals renovate their own houses, they paint their houses afresh. The evening of Baha comprises the spirit possession ceremony, where everyone starts singing the Baha songs. There are young men that enter into a trance-like state and they impersonate different major deities such as Marangburu, Jaher Era and Moreko-Turuiko bongas. So, in the afternoon time, tumbak is played, young children go to the Jaher Than, they dance, sing and return in a procession with the Naeke or the priest at the center of the procession, right. We also have the water festival where people throw water on each other within relationship boundaries.

For example, a man is not supposed to throw water on his younger brother's wife because it is considered as inappropriate among the Santals. And most of these festivals like we see continue through the night, the merry-making, eating and singing, dancing. So, we see that most of these festivals continue throughout the night, the process of feasting, merry-making, singing and dancing. Here we have a picture of the Santal women dancing together; this is a traditional attire and they have the traditional instrument playing in a coordinated way. So, they are stepping together, some of the women playing the plate and the bowl and some of them have the wooden instrument in their hand.

So, a community that derives its sense of existence, a community that derives its identity through a shared sense of existence, where people do not consider themselves as individuals; where all marriage festivals, birth ceremonies and even death rituals happen together; where all the you know birth ceremonies, death rituals and even the marriage festivals they happen together, the entire village coming together in these occasions. So, we see that for the Santal people there is no you know selfish existence and no prayer that is asking only for one's own betterment, one's own goodness. In the goodness of the village lies the goodness of the people. Next, we are going to talk about Erok Sim. Erok Sim is an agricultural festival of the Santali people celebrated in the months of June-July.

Sim refers to the fowls that are offered on the occasion of sowing the winter paddy. So, erok is the paddy or the rice, whereas sim is the fowl. The fowl is offered to the deities on the occasion of sowing the winter paddy. The Naeke or the priest offers one fowl each to the Jaher bongas and another to the Manjhi haram or the village headmen, invoking them to make the earth fertile for rains to happen in plenitude, such that the earth can give a great harvest. So, the deities are also requested to ward off any kind of disease, evil influences and thereby increase the number of the Santal's cattle, which represents their prosperity.

So, when the offerings are over the fowls are cooked, the ones that are offered to the spirits can be cooked separately and eaten only by the Naeke or the priest. The festival is concluded by singing and dancing and it is a common belief among the Santals that the one that sows his paddy before the festival rituals will bring curse not only upon himself but the entire village. So, any kind of harvest, any kind of even touching the crops can happen only after you know, observing and enacting the rituals properly. Otherwise, if a person you know does these activities without you know paying heed to the rituals or without propitiating the deities, the person will bring upon curse not only onto himself but to the entire village. So, it is very important for the tribal people, here we are talking about the Santal specifically, to perform all the customs in a proper manner.

So, this is typically what a Santal village and a Santal hut looks like, the people, the men and the women sitting together, and I am going to conclude my lecture here today. Thank you.