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PROFILES OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN
WEST BENGAL

Freedom in Religion—A Case on Santal Women

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ASOK K. GHOSH

Preamble

It is perhaps a common and generalised view in the anthropological literature that the tribal women of India have more freedom than their Hindu counterparts. This as a statement may very well be discussed. In furtherance to taste the validity of the same, lot of qualifications in the form of basic data are essential. However, on this issue our impression indicates that a good deal of anthropological fieldwork needs to be conducted. So far specific attention has not been paid on this area of investigation. Most of the tribal monographs, perhaps all of them, have not included women's freedom as separate entities. In relation with this paper, examples may be set forth from the Santals. Works of Bodding (1935), Biswas (1956), Datta Majumdar (1956), Orans (1965), Troise (1978), etc. did not pay any special attention on women in specific terms. Although at least Bodding (1916), practically for the first time, made some remarks on the position of women among the Santals. In connection with some other works, covering other tribes, statements have been made on this topic as side issues.

Nevertheless, the above statement has a wider acceptance both in the form of writing and verbal expressions. For the present paper, we intend to accept the said statement, as a conclusive remark *per se*, on its face value. At the outset, it is our aim to examine and estimate the same in terms of comparison of the female gender relations between the Santal as a tribal group on the one hand and the Hindus on the other. Our involvement will be in the line of conventional or traditional concepts. With this, our viewpoints will be discussed on the relationship between ideal conceptualization and symptomatic facts.

In the present context, some striking disproportions may be pointed out between the freedom of the Santal women and their status in Santal religion. This situation may be accounted for in a number of ways. Among these the marked one is of male dominance in case of research work on the Santals. Most of the materials in the Santal religion have been collected by male anthropologists,

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and a great majority of informants are also males. This paper, in fact, is another addition to the same discordant load. The present work among the Santals is based on our primalistic impression that the religious concepts with which we are to deal with are equally shared by men and women. This gender equality is expected to be present simply as the members of the same society, and religion can not be any exception. Of course, there is one single exception which will be given adequate stress in appropriate context.

Female Gods and Feminine Power

If existence, merely to begin with and not in terms of numerical dominance, of female gods is considered as the evidence of female power, one should expect the same among Hindu women. But not among the Santal women, who do not possess religious freedom. In fact of basic reality, there are too few female gods or goddess among the Santals.

With a view to substantiating the above premises one can take any Santal village. In our case we took a number of Santal villages in the Jhargram subdivision of Midnapur district, an area with high concentration of the Santals. At the dead end of the village street there is the sacred grove which they call *Jaher*. There is the altar of Santal gods who they term *Bonga*. Here their village priest-*Nāike* performs sacrifice which is known as *Bonga* excutor in Santali language. In *Jaher* there are a number of altars which are used for special calendar rituals. The same *Bonga* is propitiated at different altars. In the present case, our interest lies in the gender of the *Bongas* with special reference to three of them which are most important. They are *Maran Bunu* (the great mountain), *Jaher Era* (the mistress of the grove) and *Moreko Turuiko* (the five, the seven). Out of these three deities, the *Maran Bunu* is male and he is provided with a prominent position in Santal mythology. The name *Jaher Era* itself signifies a female god. *Moreko Turuiko* constitutes five brothers and seven sisters. Although with this the mythological part appears to be ambiguous. One of the authors of the present paper (PBA) is intensively engaged with research problem on Santal religion. But he is yet to collect the myth if there is any, associated with this. Mention may be made that there is just the information from some Santals about existence of related tales with *Moreko Turuiko*. There are many more *Bongas* among the Santals and most of them are conceived as males. Exceptions are not ruled

out in case of females, but they belong to the category of witch *Bongas*.

When similar observations are made in the neighbouring Hindu villages, attention is drawn on the *pujās* (worship) of great Hindu *shakti* goddess. In this case female power and *shakti* are found to be present in dyadic manner. Taking this as a basis, it shows that female gods or goddesses are very prominent perhaps both in terms of position and number in Hindu religion (Banerjee, 1953), compared to Santal religion. In view of this Hindu women are supposed to possess greater and more freedom than Santal women with especial reference to religion. The other author (AKG) holds this opinion on the basis of his work in connection with the goddess *Kali* and other allied or similar forms.

Ritual position and participation of women

Position and participation of women in rituals are important aspects of religious life. These considerations further extend to fit into the direct bearing on gender relation even away or outside the sphere of religion. From a study on comparison of ritual organization between the Santals and Hindus, the results imply that the Hindu women are placed on a higher and more important position in the sector of religion than the Santal women.

Among the Santals, *pūja* like ceremonies and sacrifice are performed to some of their *Bongas*. In such rituals, both husband and wife take part together. A detailed examination in this sector reveals that there is a group of such rituals which only take place during crises period, of course in private sector. This has resulted in casual performance of such ritual. In between occurrence of two such rituals there is a long lapse of time, often a number of years.

In case of rituals performed in the sacred grove, *Jaher*, striking contrasts are met with. In this case the rituals are conducted and performed only by males, and females are strictly forbidden even to attend. The stringency on participation of women is further observed from the fact that the left over of the sacrificial meals is not allowed to be carried away from the *Jaher*. On the contrary, that part of unconsumed meals are to be left there which may be taken up by dogs and other animals. But under no circumstance women are allowed to take that meal.

Women's Transgression in Ritual

It is not improbable to think that the fear complex among males sets in due to assumption of female interference in the ritual sphere of the *Jaher*. This may give rise to entrance of witches. Sturfeit of materials have been collected by many scholars on witchcraft among the tribals (Sengupta, 1977) and non-tribal (Epstein, 1967; Carstairs, 1983). The Santals are no exceptions. Earlier Boddling (nd., 1942) supplied ample information. Hansda (1980) put some indirect remarks on this issue. In the concept of witchcraft, the Santals think that the witch (*lan*) is always a woman. The witch sneaks into the body of a sleeping man to eat the liver. Later the witch moves to meet the *guru*, known as *Kamrup guru*. The meeting will take place either in the *Jaher* or the witch will cast a spell on one of the trees in the *Jaher*. This will enable the witch to carry her through the air to *Kamrup guru* who lives in Kamrup in Assam. The consequence of female intruders in the *Jaher* are evident from above citations.

Among the Santals a number of women and even some men are killed each year because of witch accusation (Chaudhuri, 1984). The death part is a fact and the idea part is mere a belief. In such killings there is seldom any implication that the considered women have ever conceived themselves as witches. In connection with witchcraft one of the authors (PBA) finds some differences on information part collected from males and females. Males accept the existence of witches whom they have met and even defended themselves against. While some women completely deny the existence of witches. Such witchcraft is not altogether absent among rural Hindu women. Though this idea is dying fast with time as observed by other author (AKG) both in Midnapur area of present study, and some other districts of West Bengal.

Among the Hindus, women participate in the ritual part to a high degree. In this case, rituals of private nature are performed under the joint or common guidance of both wife and husband. In case of public rituals, both genders have equal access to witness and even to participate in the same. The Hindu gods and goddesses usually leave some sacrificial food (*prasad*), like the *Banga* does for the Santals. But in case of the Hindus, the same *prasad* is shared by both sexes, male and female. Even the sacrificial food may be carried home for other housemates who were unable to attend the ritual. In this case there is neither any constraints nor restrictions.

In terms of comparative assessment of social position, in the arena of religion the Hindu women are having appreciably greater freedom, practically at par with Hindu men, than Santal women who are lacking the same.

Finale

In the present paper attempts have been made to stress the problem which implies the areas of ideal conceptualization and factual social relationship. It is believed that for working in the sensitive part like religion, better and specific methodology is to be developed. It is suggested to investigate the ideal gender relationship as put forward through mythology. In Indian condition, there is a role of myth with regard to the origin of ideal social structure. With folklores, folktales and folksongs there are also indications of factual ideas which may throw light on the origin of rituals on the one hand and structural dichotomy along gender lines. It is further suggested that the religion of a group, especially the tribals, is to be examined in the context of others, as the Hindus. In such study at least the change may be brought about and so also the factor responsible for such change may also be identified.

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Status of Women in the Rabha Society

MANJIS KUMAR RAHA

In West Bengal the Rabha belong to a Scheduled Tribe group and their main concentration is in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. According to 1971 Census 2,466 Rabha live in West Bengal of which 1,891 or 76.68 per cent live in Cooch Behar district while 343 (13.9 per cent) dwell in Jalpaiguri district. According to 1971 Census out of 2,466 Rabha of West Bengal, 1,168 (47.36 per cent) were males and 1,298 (52.64 per cent) females.

In West Bengal the Rabha are found to live in the forest *bastees* as well as in the villages. In the former area they are mainly forest labourers engaged by the Department of Forest, Govt. of West Bengal and work for the maintenance, development and preservation of forests.

In most of the forest *bastees* they are the sole occupiers of the *bastee*. Only in a few cases they have a few co-villagers who are usually the members of some tribal groups like the Oraon. No other people are usually found to live with them. Their *bastees* though situated within or outskirts of the forest and not far off from the villages, towns and market place, but the contemporary forest rules for the maintenance, preservation and protection of the forests prevent outsiders to come in the forests. Therefore these rules have created a semi-isolated condition in the domains of the Forest Rabhas. And possibly this semi-secluded condition has helped them to preserve their long cherished matriliny to a considerable extent.

The Village Rabha in contrast to the situation prevailing in the Forest Rabha habitat, live in the villages, as already stated, in the neighbourhood of a large number of Hindu caste groups, Muslims and some tribal people. The numerically dominant among the caste people are the Rajbanshi. Among the tribals the Mech and the Oraon are the dominant groups. In the pre-partition time i.e. before 1947, the Rajbanshi formed the major and numerically and economically the most dominant group. Similarly, the Mech were

The total Rabha population of West Bengal as per 1981 census is 11,256 (0.37 percent) the males being 5,856 persons and females 5,400. In Jalpaiguri district 8,632 Rabhas reside (Males=4,509; Females=4,123) and in Cooch Behar district they number 1,832 (Males=955 and Females=897) -Ed-