

Myths and Beliefs : A Study in the Cultural Geography of the Bodos and Kandha-Parajas

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Abstract

Cultural geography accomodating the study of varied and changing environment of people provides ample scope to analyse, in a comparative perspective, the myths and beliefs, customs and rituals of different tribal cultures. The present paper aims at a comparative analysis of the myths, beliefs and rituals of the Bodos of Assam and Kandha-parajas of South West Orissa in the backdrop of their geographical condition and cultural ecology. Such a study reveals that there are certain similarities between the two cultures. Their strikingly dissimilar features are due to the distinct cultural ecology, environmental conditions and other allied factors that reared them up separately in two different parts of the country.

Introduction

Culture is, in most part, grounded upon a geographical basis ; and cultural geography which tends to the application of the idea of culture to geographical problems the idea of culture to geographical problems entails the study of varied and changing environment of people (Wagner and Mikesell, 1961) of late, myths and beliefs, rites and and rituals, customs and festivals have become subjects of engaging interest for cultural primitivists and critics of cultural geography , who emphasize five implicit themes - culture, culture area, cultural landscape, culture history and cultural ecology. In the Indian context, comparative and cross-cultural studies accomodating divergent myths, beliefs, customs and rituals can play a vital role in fostering the spirit of unity and cultural affinity among the various tribal folks thereby facilitating National Integration.

Objective

Though nourished in different ecological conditions and cultural landscape, the Bodos of Assam and the Kandha-Parajas of South West Orissa have many things in common. The delicate differences existing between the two cultures are found precisely because of their nourishment in two divergent environmental condition and cultural ecology. The present paper aims at analyzing their primordial myths and beliefs. rituals and customs in the backdrop of their distinct geographical landscape and cultural condition.

Methodology

The methodology, adopted for the purpose is comparative i.e., diachronic and synchronic. Diachronically, an attempt is made lo trace the myths , beliefs and rituals that have been embedded in both the tribal cultures since hoary past. Synchronically, a parallel study is made to find out similarities

as well as dissimilarities that are due to divergent ethos and cultural ecology.

Landscape (Bodo)

Though the Bodos have scattered themselves throughout the North-Eastern region of the country, their main concentration is in Assam, particularly on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. They owe their origin to the Mongoloid race of China and Tibet from where they came to Assam along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries for trade in silk and settled in different parts of the state. The northern tract on the bank of Brahmaputra will be about 10,000 (ten thousand) square miles covering about 10 (ten) lakh Bodo people with a density of about 100 persons per square kilometres. The entire tract stretches from the Northern part of Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, North-Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Darrang to the whole of Kokrajhar district. It is on the basis of this geographical landscape that the Bodos have been demanding for a separate homeland since long. The area of Bodo concentration is bounded on the north by the foothills of the Himalayas facing Eastern Bhutan and the surrounding plains bordering Arunachal Pradesh and on the South by the mighty Brahmaputra. Their geneology and geographical position reveals that the Bodo were dwellers in the lap of Nature. S.K. Chatterji observes that the Bodo-Kacharis have (1974) got their name from the word 'Kachar' which means low land or border land. The Dimasa Kacharis are so called as they are 'children (sa) of the big water (dima) of Brahmaputra. The names of various Bodo groups further tend to justify the fact that they are part and parcel of Nature and that their cultural geography can be rightly

studied in conjunction with their physical geography (Wagner and Makesell, 1961)

Myth

The Bodo race and religion have a rich cultural past and an analysis of their myths and beliefs reveals that their religion (Bathou dharma) was based on the deep philosophy of the five elements (ba) of Nature (thou) created by God (Ecchor). In the beginning, there was void and the Absolute created the five elements - air, earth, water, fire and ether - as active forces of Nature. The Primordial Man in Bodo religion (Moun sing sing Bourai) developed the consciousness that the lives of plants and animals were but the blessings of the five elements of the attributeless Absolute. The myth further states that the first man was presented in a dream on one Tuesday night with an euphorbia plant (siju) to be worshipped archetypally as the epitome of the five elements of Nature. The Bodos have been since then worshipping their God Bathou Borai identified with Lord Siva and His Shakti Bathou Bun symbolically on the altar of the siju plant. The altar has five ridges which correspond to the five principles and five faces of the Lord Siva. Interestingly, the long bamboo flute (siphung) which the Bodos play on has five holes, the Balhou has five knots and the Bodo elderly persons observe five principles. The myth centering round the worship of Siju Plant in fact suggests that Man and Nature are inseparable in the Bodo thought process.

Cultural landscape

The Man-Nature relationship discussed above can be further established from the

division of various social groups among the Bodos. In the beginning when Bodo people were indisciplined and disorganised, the Primordial Man came down from Heaven for creating various groups which can be correlated with the cultural geography of the Bodos. The 'Swargiaris' were declared as the direct descendents of Heaven (Swarga) and designated as worshippers (deuris). The 'Basumataris' group was called the folk of the Mother Goddess Earth (Basumata) and as such they were assigned with the land-oriented responsibilities - of cultivation, distribution of land and settlement of land disputes. The 'Narjari' group remained in charge of collecting and supplying dry jute leaves (narzoi) which are used for cooking and for chewing by the cremation party after having bath at the end of cremation. The 'Musaharis' were entrusted with the responsibilities of collecting information about tigers that killed people and domestic animals. And while doing so, they were supposed to remain on fast for observance of some sort of purification at heart. They are generally recognised as tiger folk (Endle, 1911). The 'Gayaris' were planters of arecanut (gaya); the 'Owaris' introduced, for the first time, bamboo plantation (owa); Daimaris' preferred to live by the river bank (daima) in order to earn their livelihood by fishing. Scholars like Narzi (1971) and Endle (1911) therefore call them members of the fisherman clan. The 'Thalirari' group of the Bodos is so named as they were lovers and planters of banana tree - for the first time on the earth. The 'Laichari' group is famous for growing leaves (lai), particularly banna leaves, which they collect during the festivals like Kheraipuja or Garjapuja.

The 'Hajoris' prefer to live in the hills or foothills (hajo), whereas the 'Kherkataris'

found in Kamrup district are associated with the cutting of thatch (kher). The 'Ramsiari' group is geographically concentrated to a place called 'Ramsa' in the district of Kamrup. The 'Phadangaris' found in the districts of Darrang and Kamrup indicate those people who use the bark of the Phadang tree as garment. The 'Islary' group, available fairly in good numbers in the district of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Kamrup and Darrang is, like the Swargiaris, in charge of worshipping God (Isar). The cultural landscape of the Bodos is largely dependent on Nature. This is evident from their association with earth, land, agriculture, forest, hills, leaves, jute, banana, bamboo, arecanut, riverbank, tiger cutting of thatch etc. The Bathou religion obviously makes the Bodos a part and parcel of the five elements of Nature. Their love of hills and forests, rivers and lowlands, agriculture and forest produces like timber, fruits, roots, herbs and plants is characteristics of the environmental condition or ecology under the benign blessing of Nature. They not only collect from the nearby forest and foothills wild fruits, roots, and vegetables for consumption, but also collect some plants for decoration and medicinal purposes. For instance, they make use of Sibru (a thorny plant), Jaglauri (a scented plant), Gangmala (a small plant) and laphasaiko (a plant of sour taste). The climatic condition also favours them to grow banana, betel nuts and leaves and to tend silk worm plantations, thereby facilitating Bodo women to weave Endi, Muga and silk clothes of high standard. Their worship of Mother Earth and Mainao (Goddess Lakshmi) in connection with certain seasonal and religious festivals further testifies the fact that Nature largely enriches their cultural ecology.

The ecology of Assam is largely determined by heavy shower and flood during the rainy season and by severe cold during winter. The Bodos who take rice and rice beer as their staple food obviously devote a sizeable portion of their cultivable land for growing three types of paddy. The first type called 'Bawa' is rice produced on lowlands during heavy rain. The second type called 'Maisali' is produced during winter ; whereas the third type called 'Ashu' is regarded as spring-rice. These three types of paddy crops produced in three different seasons of a year in fact correspond to the changing climatic conditions experienced by the Bodo landscape. That earth and agriculture constitute the core of their customs and beliefs becomes obvious from their observance of their fertility festival, centering round the monthly cycle of the Mother Earth which is observed in the month of Ashara (June-July) as 'Amtisua (Ambuvasi in Assamese) . During the whole week , the Bodos do not go to the field. Mother Earth is allowed to rest and so there is neither digging of soil nor ploughing of land nor going to the granary (bakhri). The Bodos also believe that any branch of a tree cut down during the unclean period of earth will never grow further. The young- Bodo boys and girls observe this period by eating Jackfruits and mangoes and on the seventh day the women folk replace their old broom sticks by new ones and plaster the floor and the walls of their houses with mud. During the period of paddy cultivation, they also observe certain minor rites and ceremonies like seed-sowing, seedling uprooting (Khotia phonai), paddy plantation (Mai gainai), paddy harvesting (Mainao Lainai) and new rice eating ceremony (Engkham godan janai) (Brahma, 1989). In all these

ceremonies Goddess Mainao is invoked offered a prayer of arecanuts and betel leaves and the Bodo farmers salutes to the East of the fields. The Brahma group of the Bodos however perform sacrifice to the sacred fire (Yajnahuti) by offering a little quantity of cooked new rice and after the ahuti the rice eating ceremony is celebrated with new rice, porks, fish curry and rice beer.

The three Bihu festivals the Bodos observe also correspond to the three seasonal changes of a calendar year signifying three different placements of Sun in the zodiac. The Katrigasa (Kati Bihu) is observed on the last day of the month of Ahin (Mid-October) under the autumnal sky when the economic condition of the people is found moth-eaten. It is therefore called the Bihu of crisis because astrologically speaking the sun enters in this month its debilitating sign called Libra thereby affecting the environment, economy and the people's state of mind. The Bodos observe this festival simply by burning earthen lamp (gasa) at the paddy fields at the altar of the Bathou , at the cowshed (goli) and at the granary. The second seasonal festival (domahi) takes place in winter a season of maturity and fulfillment in which the ripened corn is harvested to the happiness of the farmer. It is a festival that falls on the junction of two months (Pausa and Magh) signifying the change of Sun from Sagittarius to the sign of Capricorn, the tenth sign of the Zodiac . A season of fresh vegetables fruits and bumper crops as it is in Assam, people enjoy it with different types of foods - cakes, curd, new rice, rice beer, coconut etc - and entertain their friends and relatives with food and presentation of towels to elders out of respect. On this occasion young boys also construct Bhelaghar - a high temple like

structure - with dried banana leaves and green bamboos collected from forest or villages and set fire to it before dawn after passing the sleepless night in merriment. The spring time Bihu is the most colourful festival of the three in so far as it falls at the advent of the spring season (14th April) when the Sun enters its most powerful and favourable sign Aries, thereby bringing sweet shower, glamour to the climate and sylvan beauty to Nature and love and merriment to young hearts. It is called Baisagu, a festival of merriment in which young boys and girls sing and dance with ecstasy from door to door to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments like Siphung (flute) Kham (drum) and Jotha (cymbol).

Landscape (Kandha-Paraja)

The Kandha-Parajas of South West Orissa have their origin in the primitive "Dravidian race" that came from East Mediterranean root. Their largest concentration is found in the Kalahandi and Koraput districts, even though their presence is sparingly found in Baud, Ganjam and Phulbani. Kalahandi is geographically located in the mountain plateau of South West Orissa which lies between 190-3' to 230-5' N latitude and 800 -20' to 830-47' E Longitude. It is bounded by Sambalpur and Bolangir on the North, Koraput on the South, Phulbani and Koraput on the East and West respectively. The total area of the district measuring 11,835 sq. kms. is equally divided into plain lands and hilly areas. The South West Orissa is, in most part, dominated by mountain ranges and hills, plateaux and valleys, rivers and forests, and the main river that add to the health of the environment are the Mahanadi, Tel, Suktei,

Jira and other tributaries. The topologists have located three distinct natural tracts in West Orissa. The Western and North Western parts have undulating sub-mountain with isolated hills mounting over plains and rocky ridges with ravines. In the South, undulated surface having hills covered with dense sal forests provides a sylvan setting for the Kandha-Paraja and Bhunjia tribes. Another important factor that enriches the ecology of West Orissa is its extreme type of climate - hot and dry in summer, hot and humid in the rainy season, dry and cold in winter. West Orissa has places like Thuamul-Rampur in the Kalahandi district often called the Cherrapunjee of Orissa which witnesses the highest rainfall in the state (Mishra and Panda, 1992).

Of the four types of Parajas (Bada Paraja, Jodia Paraja, Chelia Paraja and Kandha Paraja), Kandha -Parajas constitutes a sub-tribe, combining Kandha and Paraja elements, and the language they speak is 'Kui' they are divided into three groups - Desia, Dangria and Kutia. The 'Desias' are so called as they are agricultural oriented people who live in the plain lands (Kacchar) - the reason why they are also called 'Kaccharia Kandha'. The Kutia Kandhas, with their large concentration in the district of Koraput, Phulbani and Kalahandi, numbering 19,136 are found dwelling in houses made nearly 3 feet below the plain level of earth (Watts, 1970). The Dangrias are found living in the deep forests and hills. Out of the 46 tribes found in Kalahandi the Kandhas occupy a position next to Gonds and their population strength 1,14,744.

A description of the landscape of the Kandha - Parajas and the ecology of the South West Orissa reveals that like the

Bodos, the Kandha Parajas too largely depend on Nature and agriculture. Though they are geographically separated from each other, the tribal economy in both the cases is largely dependent on agricultural and forest resources. Both the tribes depend on collecting timber, wild fruits, roots and vegetables from the nearby forests. Besides collecting timber fruit picking and hunting they also take to agriculture and shifting cultivation. The Kandha Parajas also depend on Podu cultivation in the forest. A large portion of Koraput and Kalahandi is found perpetually drought prone area and in the absence of appropriate water management bodies the Kandha Parajas usually replace paddy by other crops because the former is not suitable for dry land. The ecology is largely affected by the impact of civilisation and this is evident from the large scale deforestation that aggravates the drought situation. Under such circumstances the Kandha Parajas are found depending on the oil bearing seeds like sal, mahua, kusum and neem surprisingly, 75% of mahua flower is used by the tribals of Kalahandi for making country liquor which is required on feasts, festivals and religious ceremonies - a practice strongly reminiscent of the use of rice beer by the Bodos. Among the Kandha Parajas the dwellers of the forests take to Podu cultivation, otherwise called Kudkitas' which is usually undertaken in the high areas of the hills. These hilly lands are considered to be the assets of the people of the area in its entirety. In the month of Chaitra (Mid-March). When the environment is dry, the Parajas cut down twigs and branches of the trees in forests and hilly area and reduce them into ashes by setting fire. At the advent of the rainy season, the ashes mix up with soil and act as natural manure to facilitate

such crops as Kandul (a type of pulse) mustard and a type of black pulse (biri) for the first three years until the land becomes fertile for growing paddy. From the rainy season to the last part of winter the physical geography of the forest area in South West Orissa is found conducive to Podu cultivation.

Myth (Kandha-Paraja)

Myths and beliefs determine, to a great extent the cultural geography of the Kandha - Parajas. They believe like the Greeks, that the Creation came out of the union of the Sun (Dharam Devata) and Mother Goddess Earth (Dharani Mata). Like the Bodos who worship Mother Earth (Basumata) and Goddess Mainao as the protector of their fortune and crops, their Orissan counterpart worship Earth as Daruni Devi, the protector of corns, plants and animals. Their myths enjoin that Earth, Water and Fire are indispensable to life. Out of the union of 'Dharma and Dharani' was created water; from water came earth; and from earth were born inanimate and animate objects of Nature. The Kandha philosophy is therefore dualistic and in it the primal emphasis is laid on the Mother Earth. The Alma Mater is responsible for the creation and also destroys the same through the Deluge. The cultural geography of the Kandha Parajas is therefore largely conditioned by the philosophy of Shaktism. In their scheme of things, one must protect and respect Mother Earth and Nature against the onslaught of civilisation. In Kandha myth worship of earth is therefore a fundamental feature and this becomes evident from their festivals, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies. Like the Bodos they believe that rice is the gift of Mother Earth and in

order to satisfy her they offer blood to her in form of human sacrifice (Meria Vali). The shrine of Goddess Earth is, like the Bathou temple of the Bodos, placed in the middle of the village where 'Dharma and Dharani' are worshipped in a big rock and a rock post planted on the earth facing to the West. Like the Shakti of the Bathou (Bathou Buri), Goddess Earth is called 'Jaden Buddhi' in Kandha religion. The Kandha priest (Joga Jani) reminiscent of the Bodo 'Deuri' sacrifices human blood after the ritualistic worship of the Goddess. As human sacrifice has been banned since the days of the British Rule, the Kandha - Parajas satisfy Dharani by sacrificing buffalo and pig (Kuanr, 1980).

The Bodos and Kandha Parajas come closer culturally by observing several such festivals that are related to earth and agriculture. For instance the festival called 'Mati Jatra' is observed by the Kandha Parajas in the month of Chaitra in order to collect seeds for sowing in the field in a ritualistic fashion. On this occasion, cock-sacrifice is made before Mother Earth with a prayer to protect the seed for bumper crop. The seeds are sown in the field on an auspicious day called 'Akshi Tritiya' in the month of April. Their 'Rani Parav' corresponds to the seedling uprooting ceremony and paddy plantation (Mai Gainai) of the Bodos. The Parajas uproot the seedlings on one separate day on the month of Shravan and then plant them on the next day after worshipping the Goddess Earth with Sacrifice. Similarly 'Semi Jatara' is observed in the month of 'Margasirsa' (Mid-November) and for this purpose the Goddess is ritualistically offered cock, wine and 'Sim' (a bean). It is believed that Kandha people who take sim without offering the same to the Goddess will invite disease and suffering

when the plantation in the fields takes a green hue, the Paraja people bow their heads before Goddess Dharani, with deep gratitude and worship her by sprinkling milk and by planting the twigs of wild turmeric plant on it. This is observed as 'Harali uansa' on the no moon night in the month of Shravan. The new rice eating ceremony (Nua khai), reminiscent of the Bodo 'Engkham godan janai' is observed in the month of Bhadrav (August - September) with much religious fervour. On this day the Kandha priest (Jani) remains on fast, collects new rice from the field which is cooked with milk and molases. In the forest, the cooked new rice (navanna) is offered to Daruni Devi in 'Kuri leaves'. After the offering is made to the Goddess, the people of the tribe get a taste of the new rice with due permission from the priest. The importance of the Nua khai festival lies in the fact that the people irrespective of their social position take new rice in the Kurai leaves and they do so only after wearing new clothes/ dresses. After the taste of the new rice is over. In the afternoon people come out to pay respect to the elders and in the temple of Goddess Daruni and this is called special respect for eating new rice (Nua Khai Juhar). This is strongly reminiscent of the Bodo observance of the Domahi (Magh Bihu) - an occasion on which the Bodos pay respect to elders and present towels. Like the Bodo Domahi, the Parajas also celebrate a festival called 'Puspunei' (Chher-chhera) on the day of Pausa Purnima as a mark of satisfaction following the harvest of bumper crop. On this occasion the boys and girls move from village to village with baskets in their hands and sing in chorus for new corn, not like beggars, but as the representative of the festival of entertainment, signalling the end of the season of harvest. Even the

song of the young Paraja lover and beloved on the occasion of the festival called 'Dhangari Dola' shows that their culture is inseparable from the natural environment and landscape (Mishra.M, 1996). While dancing to the tune of slow but luscious music the Paraja men and women sing in praise of Daruni Devi and the river, fountain, hill, mountain and the natural landscape as a whole that fills their hearts with the ecstasy of love. This can be correlated with the song and music of the Bodos represented by Bagrumba dance which is staged in honour of the spring time Bihu festival.

Conclusion

The present study in comparative tribal culture with emphasis on the cultural geography of the Bodos and the Kandha Parajas reveals that cultural geography is largely enriched by the environmental factors and that myths and beliefs of the tribes under discussion largely condition their cultural outlook . Though they belong to two different racial origins, the Bodos and Kandha Parajas have certain striking similarities that have been established from the discussion on their myths , beliefs and festivals . Tribal minds in both the cases is dependent on nature and favourable ecological conditions which facilitate their ethos to grow. But the massive degree of deforestation , change of climatic condition , commercial , industrial and materialistic aggrandizement made by civilisation and the cruel hands of politicians - all play powerful roles to effect the purity and primeval glory of their culture landscape. Their absolute faith in nature and the natural goodness of men is being contaminated by politics. In the past to these people living in the bosom

of nature, ignorance was bliss and scientific knowledge was a curse; but this is not so nowadays. The Cultural Primitivists and the supporters of the Rousseau concept of 'Noble Savage' have perhaps greater role to play in this regard so that the naturalness of the dwellers in forests and hills and mountain environments together with their culture landscape would be protected from the onslaught of the civilisation.

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