

Festivals and Geopolitical Claims of Tribal Communities

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Abstract: State and religion are traditional agencies that define social status of different caste communities in Indian society. Tribal communities, historically, co-exist with the caste system, both having limited but significant interactions. Social status of tribal communities depends not only State and religion but also on the land-holding relations. There exists a tribe-caste continuum in which primitive tribal groups represent one end and the Brahmins, the Hindu religious elite, the other. Religion in India can be further broadly classified as religion of the scripture and popular religion. Some festivals in India represent both, the religion of the scripture and popular religion. Kumbha Mela and Medaram Jatra are two grand festivals, involving over ten million people and having contrasting characteristics. While the Kumbha Mela represents the 'Great' Hindu tradition having both the sanctions of the scriptures and people, Medaram Jatra is a grand and popular tribal tradition but not a 'great' one as it does not involve the urban religious elites or their scriptures. However, both these festivals offer opportunities to the 'little' tribal communities to express their claims, specially the geopolitical ones. The present study is based on the study of the two aforesaid grand festivals not just as events, but as historical, social traditions having their own 'habitus' and 'doxa' and involving geopolitical claims of the tribal communities. While the tribal communities struggling with the the issue displacement put forth their claims within the Kumbha Mela framework, the Medaram Jatra represents the claims of a community assimilated culturally as cultivators.

Keywords: Kumbha Mela, Medaram Jatra, Sovereign Space, Cultural Space, Land Rights.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is customary to include festivals of tribal communities in their ethnographic studies. Such inclusions treat festivals as social-religious amusement. There is a general tendency to explain the world-view of a community with the help of religious practices and festivals. In this way festivals are usually studied within the ecosystem of individual tribes, a limited space, instead of national or even regional space. If we expand the space to a regional or national level, and look at the ethnographies of tribes, we find that even if their world-views are different from each other, at least in details, if not in spirit, many of their festivals are common. Some of them are common with the caste-Hindu society as well. This is a little intriguing and it deserves anthropological explanation. Further, if we extend the issue of festival to the pilgrimage practices, we get even more complicated picture. We find that some pilgrimage practices that appear to be unique to one community have elements of similarity with other community. We also find that over a period of time tribal communities have started participating in the festivals and pilgrimage traditions of other communities including the caste-Hindus. These observations instigate us to undertake an anthropological look at the festivals and pilgrimage practices beyond the bounds of individual ethnographies of a tribe. While doing so, we realise that festivals and pilgrimage practices do not only represent the world-views of tribal communities, they also represent a tradition of geopolitics in which struggle and claims of power and space are also inherent.

1.1 GRAND FESTIVALS IN INDIA

On the basis of social constitution, Grand Festivals can be classified into three different classes. The first one is those caste-Hindu festivals that have transcended all community boundaries over a period of time. The foremost among them is Makar Sankranti which is observed during the Magh month of the Hindu calendar at the end of winter solstice. The

second are those tribal fests that are being celebrated by the caste-Hindu communities as well. These include Karma fest, Manasa Puja and Tusu fest of eastern India[1]. The third class of fests includes those that were earlier celebrated only by one tribal community but over a period of time other tribal communities have also started celebrating it. These include Saruhul, originally an Oraon fest and Sohrai, originally a Santhal fest. The fourth class in our scheme consists of community specific fests. Chitragupta Puja of the Kayastha, a caste-Hindu community, Chauharmal Mela of Dusadh, a dalit community of Bihar are examples of community specific fests. Most of the tribal fests fall under this category.

There is another class of fests celebrated by tribal communities that have pilgrimage practices involved in them. These include Enda Penu Jatra [2], Bali Jatra [3], Patkhanda Jatra [4], Kandul Jatra [5], Sulia Jatra [6], Nagoba Jatra [7], Edamma Jatra [8], Khandoba Jatra. Medaram Jatra of the Koya tribe in Godavari valley forms a part of this tradition.

If we take a look at the middle of the fest-spectrum mentioned above, we find that popularity of Sarhul-Sohrai and Karma-Mansa has been growing for a long time now, and their growth post-independence is phenomenal. Same is the case of Medaram Jatra in which even the caste-Hindu communities have started participating besides tribal communities of seven states. This actually explains our stand that festivals are not merely social-religious affair, they rather have power-space objectives inherent in them.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical framework adopted for the study is that of 'Great Traditions' proposed by Robert Redfield [9]. The secondary one is that of 'Cultural Reproduction' proposed by Pierre Bourdieu [10]. Ratzel's framework of anthropogeography [11] that deals with space in terms of power is being used to highlight the claims of tribal communities and regional differences therein. In essence this paper assumes that 'Great Traditions' conceived by the urban elites has elements of violence in it and this violence is being countered by the tribal communities through their strategic engagement in festivals. The violence may be only symbolic in nature but it exists, nevertheless. The fundamental question that has been haunting this work is why and how a 'little' tribal tradition like Medaram Jatra becomes so 'great'? The question, in a sense, problematizes the fundamental association between the 'little' and 'great' traditions in which the role of urban elite has not been examined critically. It forces us to ask the fundamental question: Why the urban elite create the 'great tradition' in the first place?

The answer to our second questions comes from the 'cultural reproduction' theory of Pierre Bourdieu in which culture is seen as a tool for maintaining social status-quo, and consequently hegemony. The urban elite reproduces the culture to establish and maintain its control over the society. In the process, it engages four types of capitals—physical, social, cultural and symbolic and four types of violence associated with the capitals—direct, social, cultural, and symbolic. In this scheme, culture creates what Gramsci calls 'hegemony discourse'. However, the hegemony discourse is not uniform in India because of development of state-tribal and religion-tribal relations within physical and what Ratzel calls organic space for growth.

If violence alone is the rule of the game, one may ask, why then are we using the framework of Redfield? We cannot abandon Redfield because violence alone cannot describe all social relations and functions. It is difficult to conceive a large multi-cultural society like India in which all communities are in perpetual conflict and violence. Some degree of consent among the diverse communities must exist. This consent may not be completely natural rather it may be, to a large extent, what Burawoy calls 'manufactured consent' between the dominant and the dominated communities. Nevertheless, it must exist for harmonious functioning of the society, how-so-ever temporary that harmony may be.

Another problem that we have to take into consideration comes from the subaltern school in which Partha Chatterjee problematizes the functions of the religion by observing that in India the religion of the scripture has never corresponded exactly to the popular religion [12]. Popular practices go beyond what is prescribed by the cultural elite. There are sufficient evidences to take into account Partha's claim apart from those tendered by him in support of his claims. Since majority of the festivals in India have religious overtones, not only the two that are subject of our study, we have to take into consideration this divergence as well.

The problems of consent and divergence can be addressed best within the framework of Redfield in which the rural and tribal traditions are gathered, assimilated, conceptualized and abstracted into 'Great Traditions' and articulated back to the village and tribal communities. While the village communities adopts it wholly, the tribal communities remain selective towards the abstractions. In this way a consent is evolved among the contesting communities. Conflict, contest and

consent co-exist. They have co-existed traditionally. The balance of this co-existence, however, varies according to space, and therefore, Ratzel's space theory becomes significant.

There is a caveat, however, that has to be taken into account. The collection and abstraction of 'Little Traditions', undertaken historically by the urban elites, is not a leisure activity for amusement or out of obsession. It is rather contingent upon the cultural elite residing in towns. If they do not integrate the 'little traditions' somebody else will, and the popularity of the new 'great tradition' so evolved may replace the old elite with the new one. For example, during the historical emergence of urban centres in India, the Brahmins failed to realise the growing popularity of 'non-violence' and its potential of becoming a religious tradition creating an opportunity for Buddhist and Jain monks. (The contingency of a newly emerging popular little tradition does not form the part of Redfield's theory. It is an empirical observation of this author.) What is being proposed in this argument is the fact that tribal communities have not been the mute suppliers of 'little' traditions, they have rather exercised, a kind of control, over the dominant cultural elite. On the other hand, while filtering a part of the 'Great Tradition' to be adopted, the sense of Geopolitik, struggle for power and space, has also played a role among the tribal communities.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present paper is an offshoot of my MPhil and DPhil studies having a qualitative approach based on analysis of 16 ethnographies and 12 district gazetteers of colonial period, surveys of Simhastha Kumbha Mela of Ujjain in 2017 and Medaram Jatra of 2018 and 2020, surveys of tribal villages Surajpura, Rupahedi, and Bhilkheda in Ujjain district, Marigeta in Malkangiri district, Koyabekur in Dantewada district and Medaram in Jayshankar Bhupalpally (Now Mulugu) district.

III. DATA

The data collected through the field surveys focuses on the spaces in which the Grand Festivals are functional, the activities that are associated with the tribal communities and their social significance. They are being presented here in the relevant form.

3.1 Exploring the Kumbha Mela Space

The state-tribal relation and religion-tribal relation varies within space. The same tribe has different social status in different locations. Accordingly, its involvement in caste-Hindu religious space also varies. Among the four Kumbha Mela sites—Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik—tribal visibility is most vibrant at Ujjain. Here, we find their institutional presence as they have penetrated the physical space of Kumbha Mela by building Dharmshalas (community boarding houses) in the Temple Complex of Ujjain extending from Sidhdhavat Ghat to Chintaman Ghat. These constructions are not older than ten years but they embody almost five decades of mobilisation of people and resources. Survey of the leading villages associated with their construction and post-Mela use of these buildings reveal the geopolitics of tribal participation in Kumbha Mela.

First of all, it is difficult to find any exclusively tribal village in the entire Malwa-Nimar region of which Ujjain has been a part. On the contrary, it is possible to find erstwhile tribal villages, which do not have any tribal population now. For example, Bhilkheda (meaning Farmland of the Bhils) of Ghatiya tehsil in Ujjain district does not have any Bhil household left now. The migration indicates post-independence movement of community to reserved parliamentary and legislative constituencies besides migration in search of job. Moreover, it indicates the pressure on land.

It is worth mentioning here that Malwa-Nimar region saw remarkable demographic changes during the Maratha and British rule. As mentioned earlier, larger tribes like Bhils and Meenas (an erstwhile denotified tribe) were included in the lower ranks of Maratha army (as guards of forts and roads) and were given land grants to settle as cultivators. During the colonial rule, some smaller wandering tribes like Moghiya (often called criminal tribes) were also rehabilitated in this region. These communities found it difficult to cling on to their lands after independence. Introduction of Soya cultivation released some pressure off these communities, but the lack of irrigation facilities increased their struggle. They had been inducted into Hinduism much earlier and their exposure to the new religion was more profound than their counterparts in eastern of central India. Moreover, their physical space had constricted severely due to lack of forests between Rajasthan and Marathwada. This constriction of physical space along with their fractured social status varying across the space and

their proximity with the ruling class forced them to find organic space within the caste-Hindu community instead of trying to find their tribal identity and mobilise their communities.

In the eastern and central India, story was a little different because the tribals present here had the privilege of physical space in the form of forest though they had to struggle bitterly with the colonial rulers who intended to drive them out of the forests and in the process united them. Similar effects were produced by land revenue systems introduced by the colonial rule. The tribals of the eastern and central India revolted frequently but the western region remained relatively quiet.

There are some more evidences in support of strategic use of Kumbha Mela space by the tribal community. Tribal festivities across India are marked by liquor consumption and animal sacrifice. Among the Kumbha Mela sites, Ujjain presents the only case where these two symbols of tribal culture are present emphatically. Here, the deities present in the Temple Complex consume liquor and sacrificed animal. While the liquor is offered to Kal Bairav, animal sacrifice to a deity called Bhukhi Mata (meaning the hungry goddess). If we look at the hierarchical profile of Kal Bhairav, we find a striking similarity of status with the tribal community itself. Kal Bhairav is considered to be the guard of the towns and temples while the Bhils and Meenas were also in the same role in Maratha and Colonial Rule (after formation of separate Bhil Police Force and Meena Police Force in South Rajasthan and Malwa respectively). This evidence suggests that the strategic use of Kumbha Mela space in favour of tribal community was actually supported by the religious elites of the region.

Our observation here is in consonance with Sovereign Space theory with Kama Maclean which argues that Kumbha Mela was used to assert religious rights by caste-Hindus during colonial rule, particularly after Queen's Proclamation of 1864 which recognized religious independence of Indian subjects. The scope of this space was extended by the Pryagwals (citizens of Prayag) who started, in due course of time, asserting their social rights as well. Later on, the nationalist leaders used the event for propagation of political descent. In this way, the event helped in transforming the attitude to societies spread across the length and breadth of India.

However, our argument differs from Maclean's on the strategy front. The tribal communities participating in the Kumbha Mela were having motives beyond sovereignty. Kumbha Mela also provided an opportunity to unite communities for struggle for power with other communities. As a respondent remarked during the survey, the community having larger number of dharmshalas also has larger share of representation in legislative assembly of the state and parliament of the country. It was pointed out that Balai Maviyas (a Kabirpanthi sect) who have maximum number of Dharmshalas in Ujjain have also succeeded thrice in getting their members elected as parliament representative from Ujjain. Similarly, Dhakad Rajput community, having Dharmshalas lesser only than Balai Malviyas, have succeeded thrice in getting their member elected as chief-minister of the state. While this correlation might not be statistically significant, it does present a claim. The claim itself, in turn, points out to the strategy that we are talking about.

Our survey reveals that the fear of losing land is present among all the tribal communities participating in the Kumbha Mela. To protect their land, the youngsters migrate to nearby towns (mostly in the state of their origin) in search of jobs during the non-farming season which is quite long due to absence of irrigation facilities. They undertake daily-wage work as their level of education does not fetch them regular jobs. They are struggling for government jobs and try to educate their youngsters to the best of their resources. They complain that the teachers in their village schools do not belong to their community and there is no representation of their village in the local police force.

3.2 Exploring Medaram Jatra Space

If we look at state-tribal space, we find Koyas to be in adverse condition. As per oral traditions of Koya Puranam, Koyas had a struggle with the Kakatiya rulers in which they lost their leaders. Their territory was, therefore, subjugated and brought under Kakatiya revenue system however small the amount maybe. The tribal-religion space is also not very encouraging. Though there are narratives that claim that Koyas have descended from the legendry Bheema of Mahabharata mythology but in practice, Koya appear to be worshipping village level deities besides a very strong ancestor worship tradition of Velpu. In fact, it is the Velpu traditions that unites the Koyas trapped in three different locations with three different ethnographies. (One presents them as traditional hunter-gatherer community of Bastar (with the claim that this was the original community that migrated to other regions), the other presents them as pastoral community of Malkangiri in Odisha and the third one presents them as the cultivator community of Godavari river valley south of Bastar and Malkangiri. There are significant ethnographical problems that are beyond the scope of this paper. For

example, clan names of Koyas differ in all the three regions.) The tribe-religion space gets further problematized by large scale conversions of Koyas into Muslim and Christian religions during colonial and pre-colonial period. The converted Koyas challenged the physical space, specially the cultivable land in many districts. The conversions had the support of the ruling communities of their respective period as well. Local narratives suggest that the constriction of tribal-religion space during the colonial period raised the popularity of the Jatra.

As far as the physical space is concerned, Koyas enjoyed the buffer of forest cover for a long duration in history in all the three geographic regions. They continued their pastoral activities along with shifting cultivation. Having the tradition of human sacrifice, they were dreaded by other communities including the tribal ones. It cannot be said with any degree of certainty that they did not face any struggle for the forest space but that struggle did not affect their claims. They remained most populous tribe of their region.

Because of their number, they were in a position to lead other tribal communities of their region during the colonial conflicts for land revenue. This leadership role established a kind of tribal solidarity in Godavari valley. Amidst this solidarity, the tribal pilgrimage practice of Medaram Jatra gained popularity among the tribal fraternity, primarily, because it presented a narrative of resistance from a tribal leader against the state. During our survey, we found narratives supporting this development. In Godavari valley, Koyas are treated as leaders by the smaller tribal communities and a small section of them calls themselves as 'Doralu' or 'Rajalu' (people of the ruling community).

'Doralu' claim does not have any supporting evidence. No formation of state ever took place even in the remote history of Koyas. They were cultivators on arrival in Godavari valley and initially they were farm labourers. However, like other cultivator communities of the region, they patronised a balladeer community called 'Doli' and hence they became Kings for their beneficiaries. This balladeer community later raised the status of their Jatra making it a multi-community fest.

Pressure on Koya land increased after independence because of three events in 1960s. The Odisha state government decided to rehabilitate the Bangladeshi migrants in Koraput district. Andhra Pradesh Government conceded the claims of wandering Lambadi community and gave them tribal status in 1964 which motivated wandering communities of other states to cross the border and claim Lambadi identity. At the same time entire Godavari valley came under the influence of Naxalbari movement restricting all possibilities of tribal mobilisation on identity ground. However, none of these events could restrict the festivity of Medaram Jatra. Its strategic role remained intact.

If we focus on the physical space of the Mela, we get more insights on the status of Koya tribe with relation to state as well as other communities. At the Jatra site there are no permanent boarding facilities. Temporary boarding facilities are installed in front of Koya houses for which the household gets a fixed rent. The land is used by the members of Mala community who erect tents on them and charge the visitors. The charges are phenomenal but it is not shared with the owner of the land.

At the Jatra site, there is huge state presence in the form of forest department, panchayati raj department, road transport department and district administration. The role of Medaram Gram Panchayat is limited to maintaining cleanliness and hygiene. The site administration remains with the district panchayat of Jayshankar Bhupalpally. This means all the vending licences are issued by the district panchayat and corresponding revenues go into the coffers of the district.

Besides liquor and sacrificial animal and fowl, Medaram Jatra presents huge market for jaggery, which is offered to the deity as *Bhangaram* (gold). This is a symbolic offering but the weight that is offered is not symbolic by any scale. It is customary for a devotee to offer jaggery equal to his/her weight. The custom is not followed strictly anymore but the usual offering is not less than ten kilograms. Several tonnes of jaggery is offered within a couple of days. Consumption of meat and chicken in community fests is also in thousands of tonnes. However, Koyas are not the producers of any of these items in any significant proportions. They are not entitled even to issue the vending licences.

The only advantage the Jatra has to offer to the local Koya community is the communication. Both the district and the forest administration remain in touch with the village throughout the year. The Jatra being biennial, preparations are on throughout the year. As a result, the forest rights of the village community has been cleared and disposal of land disputes, encroachments, and claims takes lesser time than other parts of the state. In this way Jatra provides a strategic space to the local Koya community. Within this strategic space, they have got an English Medium Girl's School, a primary healthcare centre and a Tribal Museum established in their village. They grow and consume millets and they have secured their territory from Lambadi intrusion.

Koyas of other states—Odisha and Chhattisgarh have also benefitted from the strategic space created by the Jatra. They have got their forest rights settled within the last ten years and have started practicing settled cultivation. In Chhattisgarh, they are a part of the tribal movement that ended with creation of separate state. However, no such mobilisation is visible in Odisha where basic infrastructure like road, railway or telecommunication is yet to reach the tribal hinterland of Malkangiri.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Innovative tribal-market studies of Surajit Chandra Sinha began exploring tribal spaces in terms of economic relations. Tribal movement studies present some idea of the tribal space in terms of political relations. However, tribal space in terms of cultural relations remains largely obscure. Grand festivals provide us an opportunity to explore this space. We find that cultural space is dependent on tribal-state and tribal-religion relations in India. These two relations make cultural relations fragmented. The same community has different social status on the tribe-caste continuum within a span of hundred kilometres and accordingly, it has different cultural practices as well. As a result, tribal participation in a Grand tradition has different motives and claims inherent in it. The sovereign space theory proposed by Kama Maclean provides a framework to study the motivations and claims of different communities participating in a Grand Festival. Within this framework, when we study Grand festivals having different cultural origins, we find that the sovereign space becomes a strategic space depending on the requirements of the communities involved. Although land right remains the central claim of tribal communities, it manifests in different forms. Tribal communities participating in the Kumbha Mela are more concerned with the market pressure and they seek share in political power to preserve their land rights. The Koya community in Medaram Jatra is concerned with the pressure from the state and another tribal community Lambadi and it uses the Festival for maintaining continuous communication with government officials to maintain its claim of being a traditional cultivator community.

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