

Religion of Kolha Tribe of Odisha: A Recent Study on Continuity and Change

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India is a vast sub-continent where various races are living since a remote past. V.A. Smith has rightly described India as an ethnological museum as it is the homeland of various races¹. The tribal communities represent an important social category in the broad sphere of Indian social structure. After South Africa; India has the largest population in the world. India represents more than 8.6 percent scheduled tribe of the total population. The prominent tribes like the *Kols*, the *Bhills* and the *Santhals* were living in India in the past². According to the census report of 2011 there are 705 number of tribal community in India³. The tribes are considered as the original inhabitants of India who carry forward a legacy of rich and distinct cultural traits for centuries⁴.

Tribal society is an exclusive society. Their society witnessed a rich, colorful and fascinating culture from a remote past. They have their own birth and death rituals. They are the worshipper of nature and worship the natural elements like the animals, trees, stones and crops. Most of our contemporary cultures owe their origin to tribal oriented customs and traditions⁵. Thus it is essential to focus on different tribal Culture and religion to matrix of their societies. Tribes are basically the dweller of the forests. They consider the forest as their home and hearth. They live in isolation from other communities since long. But we have understood very little about various facets of their life. On many occasions they are ignored as an illiterate lot. However the large scale socio-religious transformation in the modern societies has affected the tribes. Thus more radical and imperative to us today are to understand the cultural and religion of the tribes and to analyze the change that has been brought by the modernization and globalization. Odisha is one of the most fascinating states of India. There are as many as 62 different tribal communities inhabited the state of Odisha⁶. Among them the *Kolhas* are one of the most important tribal communities of north Odisha who migrated from the present Jharkhand state and permanently settled in north Odisha. They are mostly found in the district of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar.

Religion

The *Kolhas* are mostly animists and polytheists and conceived of a large pantheon of supernatural beings that controlled their abode life. They did rituals of their own. Both Gods and Goddess are termed as *Bongas*, the word *Bonga* is generic name and is applied indiscriminately refer to god and spirits. The real meaning of *Bonga* is a power, force and the religion of the *Kolhas* may be called Bongaism⁷.who regulates their day to day individual and communal behaviour. There was no priestly class above them. Presently, the festivals like, *Maghi*, *Baha* and others begin and end with their traditional worship first and then end songs and dances. They reject the importance of the *Vedas*, *Vedic* Gods and the rituals. They themselves worship the nature and natural elements. Animals like tigers, tigresses, cows and others are worshipped by them. They also worship the hills, forests and stones. Tree worship is common among them. The spirit of the dead ancestors normally takes shelter inside the single-roomed house or in the kitchen, where offerings are made in their honour on festive occasions⁸.

The *Kolhas* worship *Singbonga*, *Basuki Thakurani*, *Garam Siri*, *Marangbonga*, *Burubonga*, *Desaulibonga*, *Gadabonga*, *Nage Era*, *Jahirabudi*, *Bagiabonga*, etc. The headman of the house worships on the occasions relating to domestic affairs as while the *Dehuri* worships on the occasion of communal affairs.

Singbonga

Singbonga is the supreme God of the *Kolhas*. Although no definite hierarchical order of the *bongas* is recognised, there is a general consensus that *Singbonga* is the chief among all, who created the universe. The other name of *Singbonga* is *Dharamdebta* or the sun God⁹.He is believed to be omnipresent and hence, no definite place of worship is accorded to Him. The neighbouring community of the *Kolhas* also worship *Dharamdebta*. He is worshiped first at any festive occasion and the *Dehuri* or the village priest sacrifices a white cock in his honour. Even in family worships *Singbonga* is propitiated first and then the other Gods and spirits. He punished them who neglect in their worship. Sometime He appears in dream as an old man with white hair on his head. If the God gives any message in dream, it is regarded as the message of God himself¹⁰.He is worshipped as a benevolent God. He is kind to men and animals. The *Ojhas* believe that *Singbonga* is also the God of tantric knowledge.

Nage Era

Nage Era is known as the Goddess of water. She lives in the nearby ponds, streams and rivers. It is believed that some place inside the river is the abode of the *Nage* so that they did not disturb the water throwing stones. She is believed to be the wife of *Singbonga*. She is very fond of pig and *Kolhas* offer pig, fowls, turmeric and eggs to her. Wherever the *Nage bonga* is lived, water never dried up. She is very kind hearted and sympathetic *bonga* of the *Kolhas*. When *Nage bonga* is annoyed people suffer from conjunctivitis and diseases of the ear¹¹.

Basuki Thakurani

Basuki is the earth Goddess and is worshipped as one of the protectors of the entire *Kolha* community¹². Her worship, like that of the *Singbonga*, is done during every ritual and usually a black cook is offered in her honour. Every young and old, before taking their delicious drink, rice beer pour a few drops on the earth, which is thought to be an offer to the earth Goddess. In household rituals also *Basuki Thakurani* is worshipped before the real ritual begins.

Garam Siri

Garam Siri is regarded as the village deity who is installed amidst a *sal* grove popularly known as *Jahira*. He is responsible for the happiness, health, and prosperity of the village. The villagers use new leaves and fruits of the forest after offering *Garam Siri* and his wife *Kiasuni Thakurani* every year¹³. They are represented by two stones with vermilion inside the *Jahira*. The agricultural produce such as maize, crops and others are offered first at *Jahira* (the worship place of *Garam siri*) and then taken. When epidemics like small pox, chicken pox, diarrhoea and other diseases break out, the villagers still worship and pray *Garam siri* for the eradication of the diseases. The *Kolhas* believe that unless *Garam siri* is propitiated, tigers would roar at night near the village, snakes would move near the houses and the diseases would break out. So the villagers take special care for sacrificing red cocks and offer new fruits and flowers of natural or agricultural produce¹⁴.



Garam Siri

Burubonga

Buru in *Munda* language means a hill, big or small. *Bonga* means the god or the spirit. The god residing in the hills are called *Burubonga*. The *Kolhas* partly depends on agriculture and mainly upon the hill and forests. The hills are the real friends of the *Kolhas*. They collect strong wood to build their houses and necessary articles, gather firewood to burn fire. They also collect the medicinal herbs, fruits, flowers etc. Cows graze in the hills and plains. So they worship the hills in the names of *Burubonga*.¹⁵ In spite of decreasing demand on the forest, the *Kolhas* still propitiates the *Burubonga*. During communal hunting expedition, the village *Dehuri* offer cook to the forest God for their success. Besides communal hunting, before moving to the forest, a group of individuals worship the forest God. They believe that *Burubonga* protects them in the forest and nothing evil happens till the deity is satisfied.

Dessaulibonga

Dessaulibonga is an important deity of the *Kolhas*. *Dessauli* has always fix abode which is situated somewhere outside the village boundary. It is always under a tree, Where the *Kolhas* place a flat stone slab on which *Dessauli* is believed to rest. The tree is tabooed to the *Kolhas*. No one may plunk leaves of the tree or cut its branches, fell it or plough land under it¹⁶. She is a female Goddess identified with the Goddess of diseases. She causes great and deadly diseases like small pox, cholera and epidemics. These

diseases are collectively known as *maranghasu* by the *Kolhas*. she appears to be a forest deity and his consort *Jahira Buru* is conceived as the spirit of the village grove or *Jahira*. Both are beneficent and every village knows the place of two *bongas*. With the outbreak of epidemics, propitiation starts in honour of *Dessauli* by all the villagers headed by the *Dehuri*. It is believed that she is provoked and all possible steps are taken to release her anger. The *Dessauli* instruct the *Dehuri* in dream about all her desire and accordingly sacrifice of cook, goats and others are made to cool her down. The *Kolhas* usually believe that *Dessauli* appears in dreams when ever people dream of a man on hoarse back, or a European or a man with *Khaki* turban they know that *Dessauli* is offended and demands placation. Then the *Dehuri* offers a hen or a cook or a goat to propitiate her.

Bagiabonga

Bagiabonga is a powerful *Kolha* deity. It is a male God, having very important position. He is separately and carefully worshipped. A black fowl is offered for him. He is worshipped to ward off dangers of the jungles for men and cows¹⁷.

Apart from the traditional village deities all over the *Kolha* settlement, they share the faith on spirit worship or ghost worship. The *Kolhas* of Jharkhand and Odisha consider some spirits as benevolent while the others as malevolent.

The benevolent spirits are the ancestral spirits, *Singbonga*, *Bhaghiabonga*, *Dessaulibonga*, *Burubonga*, *Gram Siri*, *Kudra* etc. They protect the persons' properties and animal wealth in the jungle and paddy in the field, etc. These spirits and gods bless the *Kolha* people and protected from the malevolent spirit. These gods are also harmful and punished, when they are neglected.

There are malevolent spirits in the world view of the *Kolhas* i.e., *Dakin*, *Jogin*, *Churin*, *Bhut*, etc. These spirits are harmful for them¹⁸. The *Kolhas* believe that these spirits are the cause of sorrow and sufferings in their life. When a pregnant woman dies her soul becomes a dangerous spirit which is harmful to the people. Under this situation the *Ojha* or the spirit doctor can expel them by using his *tantric* power from human body, houses and outskirt of villages. They made a sacrifice of cook to satisfy the spirit. The spirit doctor is also called as *Deonara* of the village. The *Dehuri* is almost always a *Kolha*. The *Deonara* may or may not be a *Kolha* he may belong to any caste or tribe living in the village. The *Dehuri* worship the benevolent gods while the *Deonara* propitiate the malevolent spirits¹⁹.

These benevolent and malevolent spirits are representative of the *Singbonga*. They believe that the worship of the representative benevolent gods or the protector god to get the blessing of *Singboga*.

Ancestral Spirit

The *Kolhas* believe in immortality of soul. They worship their ancestral spirit in *Ading* or in the kitchen. They communicate *Singbonga* through the spirit of their ancestors. After the child birth or marriage the head of the family worship and prayer is done in *Ading* to accept new member. The ancestral spirits are beneficial spirit for all family members. After the natural death of a family member they allow the spirit to his *Ading* to be a member of his ancestors. They worship fowl, *illi* or rice bear, cooked food and pray them before every auspicious day²⁰. They believe that with the blessing of the ancestral spirit they will live in healthy and wealthy in their family.

The *Kolhas* do not believe in sin and virtue. They do not have faith in heaven and hell. The death the spirit of the dead man or woman is called *Umul Ader* which takes a place in *Ading* or Kitchen to worship as *Oabonga* or god is like acquisition a heaven. The *Kolhas* believe in rebirth but, after the rebirth there is no reward and punishment for moral and immoral activities. The social approval work is virtue and disapproval things are known as sin.

The gods of the *Kolhas* are form less and omnipresent. They have neither practised Idol worship nor made artificial god to be worshiped. They believed that god is form less and present in every natural element i.e., water, trees, hills, mountain etc. They did not admit man made image of god. They love and worship nature. They did not believe in the incarnation of god. Their gods and goddess protected them from illness, and bless with good production. Their religion gives them mental strength to fight against enemy of their community and natural calamity²¹.

Dehuri

The sacerdotal head of the *Kolha* village is called *Dehuri* who officiates in all communal worships of the village and propitiates the deities on behalf of the villagers. He is said to belong to the senior most branch of the original village family and his post is hereditary. There is no bar for an unmarried or young man to hold the post of *Dehuri*. In case a *Dehuri* dies without leaving any son to succeed him the post goes to his brother. He uses a *Dala* (a shallow basket) or new saucer made of bronze for carrying consecrated

materials which are offered to the deities during ceremonial occasions. All the deities receive gifts from his hand. The villagers love and respect him as their local priest. By virtue of his ritual status in the village the *Dehuri* enjoys certain privileges. He gets the heads of all the animals sacrificed to the deities on ritual occasions. He is a special guest in the social functions of the villagers²².

The *Ojha* or the spirit doctor controls the spirit like the *Yuginis* by their magical powers and incantations. These spirits are also tamed by the spirit doctor and they are utilised to find out spirits, to know the nature of other spirits and in many other works. The spirit doctor offers her rice, fowl or goat in the woods on each new moon day. Most of the malignant of the *Kolhas* are not indigenous to them, but have their counterparts among the neighbouring Oriyas as for example – *Gara Satamai* is the same name of *Nai Bhagabati* of the Oriya from whom they have evidently borrowed it²³. The worship of *Satamai* is performed by *Deonara* the *Kolha* also believed in malevolent spirit worship of Kali, *Suni kal*, *Rahu kal*, *Satamai*, *Chandi*, *Yugini*, *Dakini* and others. Most of the names of malevolent spirit of *Kolhas* are the foreign origin to the *Kolhas*. They also worship *Manasha*, the goddess of tantra being influenced by the people of other community. This goddess is popularly known as a tantric goddess.

Impact on Hindu Practices

The holy land of Odisha is the seat of various religious sects like *Jainism*, *Buddhism* and *Hinduism*. It is also the home of indigenous tribal religion of various communities²⁴. With this multi-racial, multi-religious; multi-cultural and multi-lingual composition, Odisha have always chosen the path of social accommodation and social integration. Thus the people of diverse religious faiths have been residing together in harmony. So its society is called as the most pluralistic society.

According to the social anthropologists and ethnographers many cultural traditions of Hinduism have organic linkage with the tribal culture. They have also viewed that, the tribal people have had continuous contact with their neighboring caste Hindus. According to Ghurye, a prominent anthropologist, tribal people are no other than the backward castes *Hindus*²⁵. On the other hand the colonial administrators hold the view that tribal and *Hindu* traditions are separate. The tribal people do not have more than casual contacts with the caste *Hindus*. But one cannot rule out the existence of isolated tribal people in India and of those people and caste *Hindus* who have been living side by side for centuries. Hence it would be unwise to think that there has been no acculturation process between the two. But some of them have also

had formed socially and culturally distinct communities and thereby had independent identities in contrast to their neighbors, the caste *Hindus*.

Hinduism directly or indirectly influenced these people as revealed from many of their religious beliefs and practices. The Hindu deities or gods of higher order, though not actually worshipped by them directly, are respected and revered. In place where they are in close contact with the non-tribal, orthodox Hindu ideas have gone deep into their minds²⁶. When the *Kolhas* dream of a magician or Muhammadan it is presumed that the *kal* or bedtime is approaching. The *Deonara* offers molasses, ghee, milk, curd, honey, sandal paste, flowers and an oil lamp. A black or red cock is sacrificed to avoid the *kal*. The manner of worship indicate resembles of Hindu rituals of sacrifice.

The *Kolhas* were greatly influenced by the neighboring caste of the society. As a result there have been the assimilated of their culture and religion. It confused the Hinduised ideas with their tribal animistic ones. They had their own priests, own method of propitiation. They believe some of the major Hindu deities, which did not conflict with their older pattern²⁷.

The *Kolhas* being influenced by the caste *Hindus* are participating in the worship of Lord *Ganesh*, *Svarasvati*, *Laxmi*, *Kali*, *Basanti*, *Durga* etc. They worship *Laxmi* as the Goddess of wealth. *Laxmi* is propitiated in every Hindu home on each Thursday. The *Kolhas* of some villages offer sweets and sun-dried rice to *Laxmi*. Some of the *Kolhas* have planted *Tulsi* plant on the front of the house and use it as the place of worship.

Thus presently there has been a great change in the socio-religious activities of the *Kolhas*. Most of them have forgotten their old cultural traditions and have adopted the culture of their neighboring caste Hindus. The influence of Christianity is very little on the *Kolhas* as they were rigid in their own religious traditions. As they are imitating the culture of the rural and backward Hindus, their change is slow and it will take more time to come to the mainstream of the society.

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