Construction of the ‘Self’ in Folklores of the Santhal Tribal Community

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the universe, man has engaged himself in struggles with nature and his surroundings. His constant struggle with his environment in different parts of the world has shaped his lifestyles, manners, literatures, and institutions over the ages. With the growth of industrial civilization and urbanization, the tribal groups all over the world have undergone transformations to cope with changes and to retain their cultural identity and self in the world. Their folklores in the form of myths, legends, stories, songs, etc. which are mainly preserved in oral tradition and are less recorded, give a startling portrait of how they have constructed their “self” amidst many hostile circumstances. These folklores interest not only the anthropologists but also the literary researchers. Folklores, being the knowledge of a group of people, not only distinguish one tribal group from another but also establish their identity and self as different from the non-tribal groups. The present paper attempts to examine selected folklores of the Santhal tribal community in and around the districts of Mayurbhanj and Sundergarh of Orissa. It is anchored with the general view that construction of identity through folklores is a vital part of the life skills of almost all tribal communities as they run the risk of gradual extinction in the face of growing urbanization and industrialization. It, therefore, makes clear that the life and culture of the Santhal tribe represent different types and stages of primitive culture, and it exemplifies how self is constructed through culture as represented in their folklores.

Keywords: self construction; folklores; resistance; environment; tradition; beliefs; Santhal

1. Introduction

The folklore of the Santhal tribe is a storehouse of oral literature which covers folk tales, myths, legends, folksongs, riddles, proverbs, folk speeches, and stories. It also includes folk dance and folk art of both graphic and plastic forms. Although myths, legends, and folklores are parts of oral tradition and unwritten literature, they intertwine and influence each other. Through them, each of the tribes
exhibits a particular character or self. Dr. Nityananda Patnaik (2002), made a sharp distinction between the two in his book “Folklore of Tribal Communities”, who is a noted anthropologist from Orissa.

“Myths are set in a distant and unrecognizable past. Legends, on the other hand, have a known historical past. In legends, facts are molded in an imaginative or even fantastic way; their heroes often possess magical or supernatural powers. But they are rooted in reality. Folklore includes songs, ballads, dances, music, impromptu drama, traditional customs, and beliefs. But all of them play a significant role in forming and maintaining the culture of the tribal group” (Preface, ix).

1.1 Orissa: The Land of Tribals

Orissa occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities. These tribes consist of the forest dwellers, the hill men, the shifting cultivators, the hunters, and the food gathering communities who follow their respective lifestyles, work habits, and traditions. By and large, they are humble and contented. Their family ties are fostered by the age-old customs and they have a strong belief in an all-powerful Providence. Often, their faith of a superior being manifests itself in their reverence for anything which appears to be peculiar -be it a piece of stone, an animal, a river, a hill, a forest, or even an idea. As a rule of their life, dance and songs are integral part of their social and private lives. They are eternal source of their recreation and relaxation. Different musical instruments are played in accompaniment of songs and dances on the occasions of birth, marriage, name-giving, attaining of puberty, sowing of seeds, harvesting, wearing new flowers, eating new fruits and new crops, hunting, thanks-giving to the local gods, etc. There is no occasion which is not marked by its appropriate style of dance and song.

1.2 The Santhals

The Santhal, being one of the largest tribal communities of Orissa, have their dwellings in the forest and hilly regions of the district of Mayurbhanj and its adjacent areas of Keonjhar and Balasore districts. They speak a language known as Santali (OlChikki) which belongs to Munda group of Aristo-Asiatic sub-family of the Austric family. At present, most of them can speak and understand Oriya. A Santhal village comprises a number of households surrounded by agricultural fields and pastures. Traditionally, Santhal men wear rough Dhoti or Gamchha and women wear green or blue checked print sarees woven by local weavers. Male members have tattoo marks on their arms, while Santhal women have tattoo marks of various designs on their arms, wrists, and chests.
Located adjacent to every village, there is one sacred grove known as ‘jaher’. It consists of Sal, the Asian neem tree where their village deities reside. ‘Manjhi-thaan’ is another sacred place of the village which is located in front of the house of the ‘Manjhi’-the headman of the village. ‘Manjhi-thaan’ is the seat of the spirit of the founder headman of the village. Rice is the staple food of the Santhals, and rice beer called ‘handia’ is the traditional drink in festivals. They follow their traditional customs and manners with respect to death, birth, and marriage ceremonies. For marriage, bride-price is given by the bridegroom’s family. Santhals believe in various deities, ghosts, and spirits who reside in hills, forests and streams. These ancestral spirits guide each and every walk of their life. They have different types of songs and dances for different occasions. The Santhal women show their artistic talents while decorating their walls with different colors and drawings.

2. Construction of ‘Self’ through Folk Literature

The methodology to examine how the Santhals express their identity and construct their self has been based on the information collected from the books of noted Anthropologists who have done fieldwork in the residing area of the Santhals. The paper is a literary examination of only a few folklores of the Santhals that expose the emotive beings of their lives which often remain neglected in anthropological studies. While anthropologists have undergone painstaking studies about the external life, manners, and mores of the Santhals, the literary study of their folklore reveals some new facts about their thinking processes. It also highlights the value and relevance of their folk-literature which help them construct their self and identity. In a larger way, it serves as a defense mechanism for them to be distinguished from other tribal communities and establishes their own identity. Thus, their folk-literature is an exercise in the creation of their unique culture and selfhood. Components of the Santhal folklores include stories, legends, songs, riddles, and proverbs. Examples of which are as follows:

3. Discussion based on Tales and Legends

“Hatiar Sakan Chene” (Elephant and the Leaf Bird)

“In the forest, there was a very wild and notorious elephant. In the same forest was a Sal tree with two leaf birds which have just given birth to several young ones. Once, the notorious elephant went and rubbed his body against the Sal tree. The Sal tree was not very big and so it started shaking to and fro. The birds requested him not to do so as the baby birds might fall out of the nest. The elephant ignored them. So, the birds got furious and threatened the elephant to stop or else face the consequences. The elephant replied that they may do anything they want. So hearing this, both the birds entered into his ears and started chirping inside. Then, the elephant
helplessly ran away, requested them to leave him alone, and asked for forgiveness. From that day, the elephant never troubled anyone” (Patnaik, 33).

This simple tale of the Santhals where human traits have been attributed to animals, speaks volumes about the self and culture of the Santhals. It teaches its community to inculcate the virtue of resistance to all wrong doings and clearly gives a message to the wrong-doers that if they indulge in teasing or torturing the weak, they can retaliate with their collective strength and prove stronger in action. It also celebrates the Santhals spirit of fortitude and suggests for them to handle any adverse situation bravely with collective strength. Like the educated and civilized societies, Santhals have knit stories to enthuse the present and the future generations with virtues like valor and courage. Such stories are passed into the character of the community and function importantly in constructing a culture or self.

Likewise, the preservation of one community’s myths and legends has always been one of the strongest forms of culture formation and the construction of self among human beings. Santhal men bear three burnt marks on their left hand; while Santhal women have tattoo marks on their body in black colour. One of the Santhal legends promotes this practice among them. The legend and the practice transfer a culture to the successive generations which give the Santhals an identity and selfhood of their own. One of the legends also goes like this:

“Once upon a time, there lived a demon lady who tortured the Santhal society. The people were looking for ways to kill her. There was a courageous Santhal named Kherwal who had been fighting the demon for years. But he died. He was then reborn and successfully killed the demon. The people were pleased and were very proud of him. In order to remember Kherwal, the Santhals suggested something but Kherwal denied this proposal. He said that as he killed the enemy, and brought prosperity and good fortune to the whole community, the people may want to remember him by putting three burnt marks on their left hand. This mark will be named as ‘Virshikha’. From that day onwards, whenever a child is born in the Santhal family, they make three burnt marks on the left hand of the infant with a heated iron rod which denotes life, death, and re-birth. The name of Kherwal’s wife was Kajal. To remember Kajal, all the Santhal wives give tattoo marks on their body in black colour. In the Santhal language, it is called “Kajal” (Patnaik, 38).

This legend preserves the brave spirit of the Santhal that is relived with the birth of each child in the tribe. This bearing of ‘virshikha’ is an identity mark of the Santhal and it gives them a sense of belongingness to be a scion of the warring spirit of Kherwal. The particular legend is an example of how human beings engage themselves in the process of canonization and become the carrier of a canon as it gives them an opportunity to glorify themselves as part of the canon.
4. Glorification of the Self through Songs and Dances

In the same way, the variety and fullness of the songs and dances of the Santhals play a pivotal role in the construction of their self and making their culture unique. Preserved by oral tradition, they speak of their beliefs and customs; thus, framing the unique identity of their community as a tribe. Of all the types of marriages among the Santhals, ‘SangeBariyat’ marriage is the most important. Before such marriage is fixed, first the boy goes to see the girl. If he appreciates her, then the family members from the girl’s side will visit the boy. If the girl’s parents approve of the boy, they sing the ‘Balakala Serenj’. At the time of ‘SangeBariyat’, the kith and kin of the groom go to the bride’s house. They are asked several riddles in the form of song by the bride’s family. These riddles are called ‘Kudum Songs’. After successfully answering these riddles, they then explain various myths and stories in the form of songs known as ‘Binti Songs’. These are songs which take their origin from the earth, the river, the birds, the animals, etc. Following the ‘Binti, the members from the bride and the groom’s side sing and dance together with songs of nature known as ‘Dong Serenj’. The occasion is called ‘Dang’. First, the groom’s party singing a song, then the bride’s side follows. Besides these marriage songs, there are songs for each social ceremony and ritual which when combined, construct the self, the identity, and the character of the whole Santhal community. Often, such songs reflect their rough life, fears, and challenges of their existence. For instance, one of the “Dong Serenj” expresses the fear of urbanization and industrialization in this manner:

“Kali Katare Michin BarpadareBairi
Kuli Anare Bandhuka Sade Gud Gud
Ama Mam Manag Akan
Ani Mani Tayam Akan
TangIni Me AlamBagiani” (Patnaik 55)

Machine is at Calcutta
Enemies are at Baripada
Guns are being fired at Kuliana
You are leading and I am behind you
Wait for me and do not go
Leaving me behind

In another DaherSerenj, such apprehensions of violence are unmistakably heard:

“Mangal Bandi Senlena Dem
Kamid AdhiharkeA h
Gate bhaidhiridipil (2)
GadaTahenkan Gadak Esetked

Vol.2 No.1 January-June 2016
The girl had gone to do brick loading work at Mangal bandi near Bihar. She saw that the brick loading work there was very difficult. There was a river and a bridge was constructed over it. Trees were cut down. Water was carried through lane. Water started flowing in a rhythmic way and it flows to the land of the earth. (Patnaik 75).

The song, quoted above, very well expresses the love of nature and environment of the Santhal.

The riddles, proverbs, and symbols used by Santhals also depict their ways of life and construct their identity as a tribal community. The tribal’s ritual incantations meant for certain formalistic worship and accompanied by the sacrifice of animate objects or offerings are marked by ethnic music. One of the invocation songs of the Santhals known by the generic name of “Bakhen”, truly depicts a Santhal’s whole philosophy of life and culture. The following invocation song was originally collected from the book “Bakhen” written by Pandit Raghunath Murmu (1905-1981) in Santhali language, printed in OL CHIKKI script, Dr Patanaik has translated it into English:

“Salutation to you, Mother Jaher Era
On the occasion of Magh festival, we offer you
The delicate chicks, the freshly husked rice,
And it is required for you to accept and listen to our prayers.
On the start of new year
And with the entry of new products and incidents,
You have to decide and welcome them.
The Sal and Mahul plants are to be full of flowers
And fruits all over and you have to create them.
We will pluck the wild leaves and sag from the forest
And the wild grass for the thatching of the house.
You have to supply them in abundance.
The tiger and tigresses are to be brought under control.
Kalke Jamun (a type of bush), Lat Jamun (a type of wild bush),
Creepers must be spread all round
Which are to be pressed down
Don’t spread any diseases in the village
And please don’t let any danger enter into our village.
Keep an eye over the enemies
And injure them on the way before entering,
To live safely and to be secured, to move freely and without any risks,
You always have to help us.
Save us from the continuous rain, flood, drought.
Give us strength, stamina, and courage to live happily” (Patnaik, 95).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, one can describe the whole life and culture of the Santhal by studying their folklores. Their folklores construct their identity and culture which they have formed over the ages. They are essentially peace loving people; they are apprehended by the violence of the wild animals and enemies who may attack and cause dangers to their lives, harvest, and culture. However, their present generation is quickly attracted towards the nearby city culture and civilization which is reaping the best harvest of information technology such as mobiles and internet. Consequently, it has created a severe threat to the Santhal’s age-old folklores which are embodiments of their culture. This is critical as the extinction of their folklores would mean the extinction of their “self”. The examination of their literary output in the form of the folklore opens new windows to their inner joys, fears and doubts and makes a plea that government and non-government bodies should come forward to preserve their rich cultural heritage by taking strict measures to curb the acquisition of their land and property in the name of development, their dwelling areas should be declared protected zones and the local and state government bodies give them all possible aids to preserve their culture and arts. The tribals like the Santhals are facing a double threat of extinction – one from the outside commercial world who sees them as ‘Other’, visit their dwellings like curiosity shop and wish to exploit their lack of formal education in the name of progress and development. On the other, the young generation of the santhals is fast being attracted to the city and modern life style, leaving its old culture and traditional arts. It is a onerous task to retain the culture and preserve the literature of the Santhals in the present age of globalized economy, there is a need of a coordinated policy and action by the state, social workers and educationists that may simultaneously work for the preservation of the culture and arts of the Santhals and other tribals, and take care of their basic needs as an inhabitant of modern age.

References