CHAPTER XIII

FOLK ELEMENTS IN BRAHMANICAL RITES
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(The super-structure of the Hindu society of Cachar is Brahmanical and thus more importance and sanctity is always attached to the rites and rituals which have an Brahmanical origin. But even these rites are not free from the contagious influence of non-Brahmanical folk elements. This observation may be better appreciated if some typical examples are cited.)

I
Pakhi Khela
(a)

Durgapuja or the worship of the goddess Durga is the most important religious ceremony of the upper caste Hindus of the district. The worship of this major deity is performed in accordance with the strictest possible Brahmanical norms. But on the Vijaya Dashami day, that is, the fourth day of the puja on which the immersion of the image takes place, a curious rite is performed. After immersion, at dusk, all the male members, particularly young men, of the house and the neighbourhood would assemble at the courtyard where the puja takes place. The entire courtyard is made extremely muddy and slippery
by free spraying of water. The headman of the family throws a coconut in the middle and instantly the entire crowd goes mad to get hold of it. For an hour or so a wild scene prevails where blows and fistfights are freely exchanged and wrestling of an unorthodox variety is vehemently demonstrated. Crude display of ugly physical gestures, generous use of obscene abuses and throwing of mud and other dirty objects form an essential part of the game. The game comes to an end when someone, obviously the sturdiest of all, finally gets hold of the coconut and comes out of the courtyard holding it over his head like a trophy. Thereby he earns the honour of the hero of the day. The ceremony is locally called 'Paki khela' (the muddy game).

(b)

No doubt the ceremony is of primitive origin and has been incorporated in Durga Puja almost in an unaffected form and which has not undergone the sophisticating process of Brahmanical Hinduism. A coconut is the most natural replica for a human skull and a number of head-hunting tribes till this day regard the head of the victim

1. "One of the main causes of the respect paid to it (coconut) seems to be its resemblance to a human head and hence it is often used as a type of actual human sacrifice." W. Crooke, The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India, Vol. I, p. 106
as a genuine trophy.\(^2\) In some parts of West Bengal, on the occasion of Dharma Puja, similar ceremony takes place, where a real human skull is used instead of a coconut.\(^3\) The game is popular only amongst the lower caste people who form the bulk of Dharma worshippers. In lower Assam, on the occasion of Janmastami a similar ceremony takes place where pieces of coconut are distributed at the end.\(^4\) In the last instance, it appears that the ceremony has been vaisnavised. The ceremonies obviously reminds us of the head-hunting past of the people who have already travelled a long way from their savage past and have undertaken a peaceful settled life. In fact, they have no knowledge of the true significance of the ceremonies which they scrupulously observe on traditional ground. One singular thing about the Cachar ceremony is that even the high caste people organise 'Peki khela' in their houses after the immersion of the Durga image and the young ones


\(^3\) A. Bhattacharyyas, Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihas, p.537

\(^4\) Dr P. Goswami, Head of the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University gives this information
of their of their houses also participates with equal zeal in the game. This signifies either an aboriginal origin of some of the local higher castes or the tremendous thrust with which the aboriginal cultural traits operate in the region.

II

Remnant of Bamboo worship

As in other places of the country, in Cachar also a Hindu marriage is accompanied by a number of female rites. Mostly they are of a primitive origin, betray a common motif and have been discussed by different scholars. The scriptural part of a Hindu marriage is regarded as solemn and performed sacramentally with chanting of Sanskrit mantras. Normally this part of the ceremony retains its purity from local influences. But in Cachar, even this holy part of the ceremony is not free from interpolation.

On the fourth day after marriage, at the bridegroom's house, the newly married couple is required to move around a circle seven times. It is the only major ceremony that takes place at the bridegroom's house and is officiated by a Brahmin priest who chants mantras while the couple moves. In the middle of the circle, four pieces of bamboo-tops form an essential part of the ceremony but
nobody, including the Brahmin priest, knows anything regarding the significance of these bamboos.

Use of bamboo in one of the major rituals betrays the legacy of the remote past when this object used to play a vital role in the day-to-day life of the people. Actually, the tribal people with Tibeto-Burman affinities still regard bamboo as a very special material. With it they manufacture their utensils, household objects, smoking pipes, water-carriers and what not. They prepare their food by putting rice in a bamboo stem and broiling it and also use bamboo shoots as a delicacy. Obviously, such an object would exert some influence on the religious life of its consumers. So the celebrated Kar festival of the Tipra tribe of Tripura State is nothing but a kind of bamboo worship. In north Bengal, the Koches and allied groups worship Bamboo which is known as Madan-Kam puja. The Bhatheli festival of the Assamese of lower Assam is also perhaps a ramification of bamboo worship.

According to S.K. Chatterjee, the Tibeto-Burman people of the Bodo variety dwelt in large numbers in the Burma Valley during the days of yore. It is natural that

5. P. Bhattacharjya, Assam Loka Utsav, p. 80
some remains of their culture would be visible amongst
the present day population of that area. So, the ritua-
listic use of bamboo at the time of marriage is in all
likelihood a remnant of the old bamboo worship practised
by the Bodo for bears of the present day population.
They retained the worship but the context has been
forgotten.

III

Folk elements in the Shraddha ceremony

(a)

Most Hindus perform the shraddha ceremony in honour
and for benefit of the souls of their deceased parents.
It is a sacramental function guided and governed essen-
tially by a Brahmin priest and his associates. But such
a ceremony is not also free from intrusion of folk
elements. It is compulsory that on the day of the shraddha,
at night, a kirtan or recital of devotional songs, should
be arranged. This recital is accompanied by beating of
Mridanga (a kind of drum, tabour). It is believed that
the entire area covered by the sound of Mridanga becomes
free from the evil influence of spirits. After the kirtana,
the performer or performers of the Shraddha takes lighted
torches of jute-sticks over their heads and move around
the entire boundary of the house. It is believed that by this ritual, a magical line is drawn which protects the inmates of the house from any evil influence of malevolent spirits. This ceremony is definitely a trace of the aboriginal practice generally known as the ceremony of expulsion of evils prevalent amongst different primitive peoples throughout the world. In almost all such ceremonies, lighted torches and beating of drums are used to oust evil spirits.

(b)

Also there is a ceremony associated with the shraddha which may be termed as the first ritual partaking of fish by the performer of the shraddha. As a rule the performer of the shraddha abstains from taking fish and other delicious objects till the shraddha is over. On the first Tuesday or Saturday after the shraddha, he takes his normal meal with fish and other objects which is marked by a ceremony. Outside the boundary of the house, a place preferably under a big tree is selected, where a dish is offered to a godling known as Kalbhairab. The dish must contain among other things a soup made of kalai, a curry prepared with a black variety of fish known as Kalbaus.

and a wafted ugly-looking fish known locally as cheng fish. Normally the street dogs make a feast out of this fish.

A god, when worshipped outside the campus of the house, obviously manifests his humble origin. Also fish is normally a taboo for a Brahmanical deity and so Kalbhairab, who has a special fascination for some ugly variety of fishes, must be a deity of non-Brahmanical origin. Kalbhairab, in other parts of India, is worshipped as a consort of Siva. It is believed that he rides a dog. It has been stated that the offerings given to Kalbhairab on the occasion of first partaking of fish is actually consumed by dogs. Also it may be mentioned that some primitive people of eastern India, like Baoris and Gonds regard dog as a sacred animal. So the worship of Kalbhairab, as already suggested by Crooke, might be regarded as an improved manifestation of primitive dog-worship and the ceremony render discussion might be a survival of such worship.

IV

So, it is evident that even in the representative and typical Brahmanical ceremonies like Durga Puja,

9. Ibid., p. 219
marriage ceremony and Shraddha, local indigenous notions have left their marks. Examples can be gathered which would reveal the magnitude of such contamination in the sphere of other minor rites. On the occasion of Laksmi worship, the young boys go out at night for burglary, which perhaps is a remnant of the old custom of nocturnal raids performed in connection with the worship of the goddess of wealth. On the days of Ambubachi, believed to be the menstruation period of the earth, people firmly believe that invariably there will be a heavy downpour. This belief has its origin in the primitive logic associated with the cult of fertility—rainfall fertilises the mother earth to bear fruit, so there must be rainfall to make her menstruation purposeful. The Vaisnavites are generally less prone to local influences, but even they cannot help accommodating a deity always represented by a tree and obviously associated with primitive tree worship. This tree-deity has been given the name Kalachand and thus equated with Krishna, though still the people regard him as a malevolent spirit quite contrary to the concept of a Vaisnavite Krishna.