MARRIAGE OF TANKS (BANDH-BIHA)
ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL CUSTOM.
As already discussed in Chapter-V that the Kora of Barabhum are regarded as the experts in digging tanks, erecting embankments, making road etc. & they themselves think earthworkings as their traditional calling (britti). They are found to grumble over any encroachment on their traditional britti by other castes which is happened at present. But it is felt that the Kora enjoy some amount of preference over the earthworkers of other castes. The local people cherish favourable opinion regarding the working habits of the Kora day-labourers. There is a general notion in this area that whatever obstruction may come in the way of digging up tank, the Kora will not leave it and they will not stop their pick and hoe until they can trace out some perennial source like a natural spring underneath the tank. The Kora are never found to abandon any kind of earthwork midway, which is often the case with labourers of other castes. In addition to this, a specific ritual role i.e. bandh-biha has been assigned to them by upper Hindu castes in the area which is beyond the reach of the day-labourers of other castes. It has actually prompted me to search out, how and when did such a social group with very low status (Ref: Chapter-X) and with a very poor numerical strength and obvious origin from a tribal stock secure such a specific ritual role. My interest gets intensified when I find that the Kora living in different parts of West Bengal and Bihar (Ref: Chapter-V), outside Barabhum Pargannah are settled agriculturists with comparatively fair substantial landholding. Of course, they subsidize their agricultural income by working as manual labourers in different kinds of vocations. In these places they do not cherish the notion that they are experts in earthworks and that earthworking is their traditional calling.
Similarly, the local people do not consider the Kora as the expert earthworkers. Moreover, we find that the Kora living in these areas outside Barabhum do not have the right of performing the ritual act of bandh-biha. In pursuing this matter in Barabhum we find that it was at the initiative of the Raja of Barabhum the Kora got the monopoly over bandh excavating and other kinds of earthworks. In this connection they received a tamar-pat about 80-100 years from now from the then chief of this estate, on the strength of which they had almost monopolized in earthworkings (for details - see Chapter-V). Even now, it is customary on the part of the cultivators of this Pargannah to call at least three Kora labourers to offer the ceremonial opening strokes with a new pick and hoe in digging up any tank. Each of them gets a new set of pick and hoe, a cloth, and a basket for the ceremonial opening of the excavation of a tank. If they continue the digging work they shall get the usual remuneration for their manual labour. This is in addition to the preferential treatment which the Kora earthworkers get from the local cultivators.

It has already been mentioned that before the water of a newly excavated tank can be used for social rituals, the Kora have to perform certain rituals known as bandh-biha i.e. the ceremony of the marriage of the tank. This may be regarded as the consecration ceremony for the tank which had to be performed sooner or later after its construction. It may take even three to four years to arrange such a function. Until and unless this function is done, the water of a particular tank is not ritually acceptable and such a tank is known as thubra-bandh or 'unmarried' or unconsecrated tank. The water of it is supposed to be of bad taste and odour and may even cause illness to those who use it. Villagers generally try to avoid using its water. Any ritual functions like purificatory bath in connection with the different rites of passage cannot be done in an 'unmarried' tank. There is also a strong belief among the Kora that if they are not properly entertained during the 'marriage' function by the owner, the water of that particular tank will surely become muddy and will taste saline. The case of Nakul Mahato of the village of Rangagara was referred to by our Kora informants. The
unkind treatment of Nakul Mahato towards the Kora Mudi diggers of
his tank resulted in spoiling the water of the tank. The villagers
try to avoid using its water. Of course, this statement of the
Kora was not supported by everyone else. High caste Brahmins of
the village do not admit the validity of such queer ideas among
the Kora. They are of the opinion that the Kora put up such absurd
stories so that common villagers may not get away from performing
such an expensive function.

While excavation work proceeds, the owner provides the workers
with one gaít (pick and mattock), one kodal (hoe), one basket and
one piece of new cloth to each of the Mudis who are engaged in
earthwork. These implements become the property of the Kora after
completion of the work. They are paid daily wages, generally in
kind, which consists of two seers of paddy or annas twelve in cash.
It takes about a month's time for six to eight Koras to excavate a
tank of medium size. Excavation generally starts in the months of
Phalgun (February-March), Chaitra (March-April) and earthwork con-
tinues throughout the month of Baisakh (April-May) and even upto
the first part of Jaistha (May-June) if the monsoon starts late.

After excavation, it is customary for the Kora diggers to
claim some cash remuneration from the owner to release the sources
of the springs by tearing up the sealing of mud and stone (the
rate varies from Re.1/- to 1/4/- per spring). The owner generally
makes the payment on the site.

After the work is over, it is for the owner to choose a conve-
nient date for the performance of the 'marriage' ceremony. It may
even take four to five years for an owner to prepare himself for
the ceremony which may involve a grand feast with meat, fish and
drink, the presentation of a cow to the Kora, a good number of
cloths, bell-metal utensils etc. to the Brahmin, Kamar and the
Kora Mudi. The expenses are approximately Rs.400 to 500. Generally this
function is held in the months of Phalgun, Chaitra and Baisakh
(February-May) after harvest when the agriculturists become tempo-
rarily solvent and are free from the routine of agricultural labour.
Information on 8 cases of bandh-biha was collected in the five villages of Pargannah Barabhum under the jurisdiction of Barabazar Police Station in Purulia district. It is quite interesting to note that in all essential points, the procedures adopted in different 'marriage' cases are same. The differences are very insignificant.

Details of one such ceremony have been given below. The owner of this tank is Sankar Mahato of Bansbera village. He performed the rituals only last year in the month of Baisakh. Though there is no specific sacred date fixed for functions, yet they prefer a full-moon day or a day in the bright fortnight generally in the months of Phalgun, Chaitra or Baisakh when the sky remains clear.

When such a function is to be performed, the owner usually contacts the Maliks or the caste-chiefs of the Kora of this region. Ratan Nudi of the village of Sankhari, the Majhi or the supreme chief and Monglu Nudi of Karmabera village, the Paramanik of the Kora of this locality are approached for fixing a date for the festival and for settling up other matters of importance like presents to be made by the owner, number of invitees from the Kora community etc. It may be mentioned here that a large number of invitees, generally 30 to 40 from the Kora caste alone, are asked to attend the function. The selection of invitees from the Kora caste solely depends upon the Majhi and Paramanik. They usually select persons from 5 or 6 villages in the neighbourhood of the tank. The Kora labourers who did the digging work for the bandh are, of course, included in the list of the invitees. It may be mentioned in this connection that the caste panchayet with Ratan Nudi as the Majhi and Monglu Nudi as the Paramanik has its jurisdiction in the following 18 villages in the neighbourhood: Lorah-dih, Sargo, Tilaboni, Karmabera, Bonkati, Sidhagora, Notun-dih, Kayra-dih, Nischintapur, Dhadanga, Namsol, Banka-dih, Dubrajpur, Guradang, Jhaira, Raj-dih and Sankhari.

The owner also contacts the Brahmin priest and the Kamar (blacksmith) who have specific ritual duty of planting the chok-khuta a post in the middle of the tank. A kirtan party (singers of
devotional songs) of the Vaisnavas is also often engaged. Well-to-do people may even contact a party of dancing-girls (Nachni) on such occasions. Besides these, the owner also extends his invitation to his close relatives. Both Kenzel and Sankar went through these preliminaries. A priest from the degraded section of Panrey Brahmin caste of Palma Gosai-dih was asked to officiate in both this case. He did the hom yajna for bandh-pratistha. Abhoy Kamar of Ragma performed the rite of planting a post on this occasion. Sankar Mahato brought a kirtan party, comprising of the Gosains of Gosai-dih for an all-night performance.

In the ceremony arranged by Sankar Mahato, about a hundred persons were invited, including forty to fortyfive Kora Mudi of Sankhari, Ragma, Karnabera, Bansbera, Amagara, Bankati villages, five members of the lineage of Abhoy Kamar of Ragma, three relatives of the Brahmin priest, ten to twelve kirtan party members and twentyfive to thirty relatives of the owner himself.

The invitees started coming to the embankment of the tank from the afternoon. It may be mentioned here that except for the wives of Sankar Mahato and Ratan Mudi, no other woman was allowed to attend the function. At about 7 P.M. in the evening, the function of bandh-pratistha was started with the Brahmin priest engaging himself in hom yajna on the embankment of the tank itself. Both Sankar Mahato and his wife who had fasted on that day, sat by the side of the priest and listened to the sanskritic incantations. The loud utterance of sanskritic mantras accompanied by the pouring of ghee or clarified butter in the fire-place of yajna from time to time during the entire period of this ritual, created a solemn atmosphere. This function lasted for an hour. The Brahmin priest got one new piece of cloth, a plate, glass and water jug or lota of bell-metal along with flattened rice, gur or molasses for tiffin and a cash present of Rs.10/- . After the fire sacrifice was over, the priest and his assistants were given rice, pulse, fish, sweets and water for drinking and cooking. They cooked their meals themselves in one corner of the embankment and took food there avoiding the touch of others. The priest took his meal in the new plate and glass given to him by the owner.
In the meantime, Ratan Mudi, the Lava or priest of Mahar Puja, started his ritual function. During the period of the bandhibha rite, the owner of the tank and his wife are referred as Gola and Gulin respectively. In the similar fashion, the Laya Ratan and his wife are called by the terms Majhi and Mejhan. Both of these couples observed fasting on the day of the function. During the performance of Mahar Puja, both the Gola and Gulin sat side by side on a mat in front of the spot selected for the ritual. The Mejhan also sat at the other corner of it. The offerings of sundried rice, flowers, leaves of bel tree, vermilion, sandalwood paste, grass blades, incense, sweets etc. were made to Dharam Deota by Ratan while he uttered spells in the Vernacular. He appealed to the Dharam deity not to harm any one who would use the water of the tank from now onwards. In appeasing the deity, a sheep was sacrificed on the spot by Ratan himself. Before the sacrifice, some leaves, flowers offered to the deity, were given to it and as the sheep started eating them, it was taken as a lucky sign by the owner. It symbolized the acceptance by the deity of the offering. After the sacrifice, the blood was sprinkled all over the spot of the puja and the blood-stained flowers, leaves etc. were finally thrown into the tank.

After this, the Kora Mudi together with the few blacksmith participants took part in a grand feast. Ratan gave a portion of the raw meat from the sacrificed sheep to the Kamar and the rest of meat was then kept for themselves. Other materials for the feast including rice, pulses, salt etc. were supplied to him by the owner. The Kora and the Kamar cooked their food separately. In a similar way, the Vaisnava singers cooked their own food and took their meals separately. Only the relatives of the owner took meals in his house. A large quantity of rice-beer was also given to the Kora and the blacksmith who spent the major portion of the night in drinking, singing and merry-making. The Vaisnava singers also sang a number of devotional songs.

Then in the early morning around 5 A.M. the rite of Gola-Gulin Chuman was held. The wife of the eldest son of Sankar was brought to the spot for this function. The Gulin wore a new sari, a new set of conch-shell bangles (sankha) and put on vermilion on
the forehead from a fresh packet. The margin of her feet was coloured red by alta. The Mejhan also dressed herself like the Gulin but the dressing articles in her case including the sari, sankha were provided by the owner. The Gola and Majhi were also worn new pieces of cloth and banians. The Majhi got them from the former.

The wife of the eldest son of Gola and Gulin took a winnowing fan containing the following articles: Jager or an inverted earthenware with a small opening at the top in which a burning lamp was kept, a small quantity of sun-dried unboiled rice, vermilion, a few paddy grains, grass blades, flowers, incense, betel leaves, a small quantity of dust and dried cow-dung powder and sweets. The Gola and Gulin stood side by side on a wooden rectangular seat or pira on the embankment of the tank and their eldest son’s wife made formal welcome to this couple in the following way. At first she brought the winnowing fan in front of them and moved it around their face three times. At the end of each circumrotary movement the winnowing fan was lowered to touch the forehead of the couple. She then put a fresh lump of vermilion on the forehead of the Gulin and the Mejhan who was standing quite near her husband. Both the Gola and Majhi followed her in smearing vermilion on the forehead of their respective wives. She finally welcomed the Gola and Gulin by pressing the betel leaves, warmed by touching the jager, against both their cheeks. It may be considered as a symbolic re-enactment of the marriage ceremonies of the owner and the Kora Majhi through the repetition of such rites like bar-bau chuman and sindur-dan quite near to the tank.

Immediately after this, the Gola placed one rupee in the water of the tank which the Kora would have to bring out by thorough searching. This they did successfully. If the coin could not be traced out, then it would mean something for the owner.

Early in the morning, just at sunrise, Abhoy Kamar and his assistants performed the ceremony of planting the post or chok-khuta rite. They took a large flat stone slab with a perforation and placed it in the centre of the tank. A wooden pole 9′ to 10′ feet long was inserted in the perforation of the stone-slab. Abhoy
himself fixed an iron trident spearhead or *trisul* on the wooden pole in such a way that a portion of the trident could be visible from the bank. Then he tied one end of a cotton-thread reel with the trident and brought the reel back to the bank by releasing it throughout the distance from the bank. Till the completion of other rituals, this thread reel was held in hand by Abhoy who stood high on the embankment.

At about 7 A.M. in the morning the last ritual i.e. *baitarani per* or crossing the tank was performed. It was purely a Kora Mudi affair. A cow was brought to the knee-deep water by Ratan Mudi and he caught hold of the cow at the neck by wiping round it a new piece of cloth and started dragging it from east to west. The Gola was then asked to catch the tail of the cow and to follow him in crossing the tank. The relatives of the Gola followed them in a line. Other participants also followed them from a distance. This cow along with the new cloth required to tie up the cow were taken away by Ratan Mudi.

Then the journey back to the house of Gola was started around 8 A.M. The Gola gave a lead to the procession. He started moving first in the direction of his house. He was found to carry water filled *jharabara*, an earthen container with multiple pores all round its body, on his head. Through the pores of this vessel, water was found to stream down his body. The entire path covered by him on the way to his home was moistened by this water. A constant supply of water was maintained by the Kora Mudi who took water in additional containers. Abhoy Kamar also accompanied the procession. He went on releasing the thread connected with *chok-khuta* or central post upto the house of Sankar Mahato. The Vaisnavas followed and sang devotional songs.

On reaching home, Sankar provided every participants with light refreshments. They were given flattened rice, curd and molasses. Now Sankar and his wife broke their fast. In addition to this, the Kora Mudi and Kamar were given sufficient rice and the cost of purchasing one goat for making a concluding feast in their own villages. Abhoy Kamar got a piece of cloth and a cash remune-
ration of ten rupees. Ratan Mudi also received the same amount in addition to what he had already got. A sum of thirty rupees was given to the musicians. They as well as the Brahmin priest and the relatives of Sankar left the place after a mid-day feast.