



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FAIRS AND FESTIVALS OF THE VILLAGE GODDESSES OF SOUTH ODISHA- A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Subaltern study as well as the history of rural folk has emerged as a recent trend of historical research. Now-a-days, it has drawn the attention of teachers, research scholars and intellectuals of the whole world to highlight the different aspects of the culture of the rural mass. A number of fairs and festivals is absorbed by the rural folk of south Odisha. Most of these fairs and festivals are associated with the village goddesses. A humble attempt has been made in this paper to bring to lime light some of the neglected fairs and festivals of south Odisha.

Key words: South Odisha, Festivals.

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INTRODUCTION

The rural folk of south Odisha observe a number of fairs and festivals round the year. Fairs, fasts and festivals differ from caste to caste, tribe to tribe, and from region to region. Although the Bengali culture had its influence on the people of north Odisha to a great extent, the Andhra or Dravidian culture is discernible in the fairs and festivals of south Odisha. This was because the Telugu speaking people constitute a good percentage of total population of the area. Besides this, the geographical situation of the area also contributes to this as the southern part of Ganjam touches Andhra Pradesh. Above all, the history of the area shows that during the British period the region was under Madras Presidency under the Chicakole *Circar*. For that reason, the region was more attached to the south than the north (Sanchita Mohanty, 2004). Fairs are usually held at inter-village or regional level with great congregations. Festivals are observed at village, inter-village or regional level. Some kind of blind beliefs or superstitions are discernible in almost all the fairs and festivals.

Thakurani Yatra: *Thakurani Yatra* is considered the most typical and famous amongst all folk festivals celebrated in south Odisha. Basically this is the outcome of most flourished Sakti cult of Odisha in this particular region. Sakti cult is so popular in this region that every village, even every individual household worships Her either as presiding deity or as the protectress (Bhagabana Sahu, 2002).

That is why the Thakuranis of this region are popularly worshipped with devotion and faith. At many places of this region the *Thakurani yatras* are observed. The *yatra* takes place bi-yearly at Berhampur, every three years at Bhanjanagar and once in twelve years in Kabisuryanagar. Usually the *Thakurani Yatra* is observed in the month of May in the different places of a region. Among all the *Thakurani yatras* of south Odisha, Berhampur *Thakurani yatra* is most famous. It is imperative here to discuss the Berhampur *Thakurani yatra* in detail.

Thakurani Yatra of Berhampur: *Budhi Thakurani* is considered as the presiding deity of the Silk City Berhampur. In Hindu tradition almost every village has presiding deity called '*Grama Devati*'. But very few urban centers, cities and towns have presiding deities like Biraja of Jajpur and Samaleswari of Sambalpur. *Thakurani* of Berhampur is considered as the presiding deity of the city. The people of Berhampur have absolute confidence on *Thakurani* for their protection in perfect *Grama Devati* style. *Thakurani* was initially associated with the weaver community of Berhampur and weaver community has earned the name 'Silk City' for the city. Hence it is no wonder that *Thakurani* is the presiding deity of the city. She is regarded as Mahashakti, Ugrachandi, Sarbamangala etc. She is being worshipped by one and all irrespective of caste and socio-economic status. The actual date of the commencement of the worship is not known but is certainly very old. Traditionally it is believed that once *Raja Narendra Deva* of Mohuri estate went on a trip to south India. During this tour he visited Rajmahendri among other places. There he somehow happened to meet the members of the

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Telugu Lingayat (*Dera*) weaver community. He was greatly impressed by their weaving technique. On his invitation some of them came and settled at Berhampur near Mohuri palace under royal patronage. In due course, the *Dera* community started weaving the famous Berhampuri *Patta* and earned the title of 'Silk City' for Berhampur. The weaver community (*Dera*) brought with them their tradition of '*Ghata Yatra*'. Probably since 1767 the festival is being celebrated every two years during the month of *Chaitra* (March/April). The festival is celebrated as the home coming of the Goddess. *Thakurani* is conceived as a young woman given away in marriage who visits her father's house in every two years. And this period of her being away from the temple at her father's place is celebrated as the festival period.

When the community (*Dera*) came to Berhampur they settled in eighteen settlements. Each *Dera* settlement had a Chief who was given the title of *Senapati* by the king of Mohuri. The chief of the eighteen *Senapatis* was given the title of *Desa Behera*. *Desa Behera* was the chief worshipper of the *Thakurani*. Every morning he used to worship the *Thakurani* by offering flowers among other things. Tradition holds it that on one *Chaitra* Tuesday at mid-night *Desa Behera* heard a young woman crying in front of his house. She was wearing a black saree and her hair was undone. On being asked about the reason for crying, she said that she was on her way to her father's house and unable to locate. *Desa Behera* as an affectionate father offered her to spend the night in his house and that he would guide Her to Her father's place the next day. After he has said this, the woman walked into the bushes on other side of the road and vanished. The old man followed her for sometime but in vain (Behuria, 1992). The next day when he went to the temple to worship the *Thakurani* his worship was practically refused by the Goddess. When he placed flowers on Her head it fell down and the same was repeated quite a number of times. *Desa Behera* realized that his worship has been rejected and out of deep remorse he sat on *dharana* (*Adhia*) near the image. After sometime heavenly voice told him that his worship will not be accepted. A father cannot worship his daughter. It is true that he was Her chief devotee but, since last night he has become Her father. But the daily worship must go on. Hence, the *Thakurani* directed him to engage the person whom he would meet first, immediately after coming out of the temple, as the priest. Incidentally the man whom he met was a barber who had come to meet him. And since then the priests in this temple are barbers. However, the *Desa Behera* continues to worship the Goddess inside his own house, after all that is Her house.

When *Desa Behera* expressed great remorse for being deprived of the worship, *Thakurani* told him that she would leave the temple and visit his house once in every two years as his daughter. On being invited by the father she will go there to spend some time in the company of Her family and friends with great pomp and ceremony and then come back. And since then this *Thakurani Yatra* is being organized (*Ibid*). Initially it used to be celebrated only by the people of *Dera* community under the leadership of *Desa Behera* but later on it has become a mass based and popular festival of Berhampur. On the *Maha Sivaratri* day which generally falls during the month of *Phalguna* in the festival years, the Chiefs of the 18 *Dera* communities meet at the residence of *Desa Behera* in *Desa Behera Sahi*. When they decide to hold the festival the matter is referred to the community (*Kula Sabha*) for approval. Thereafter important persons of the town discuss the matter. Hence the approval of the representative of the entire town including the *Thakurani* Herself is necessary for holding the

festival each time. When the decision is taken to hold the festival, the *Desa Behera* along with other devotees go in a procession to the temple to obtain the consent of the *Thakurani* for the purpose. They return back with her willingness in the form of a garland (*Agnya Mala*) on a bamboo basket. Then the Holy Pole (*Subha Khunti*) is placed near the temporary temple where the *Thakurani* would stay during the visit. The establishment of the pole marks the commencement of the process for the festival. A temporary thatched temple is constructed for Her stay and worship during the period (Subasini Patnaik, 2004). After everything is over the invitation is sent to Her for the homecoming. The *Dera* Chiefs observe fasting during the day and in the evening all of them along with *Desa Behera* and his wife go to the temple in a grand procession to invite her. After performing ceremonial worship there, they return back with garland of *Itala* (*Itamalla*) flowers in a basket. The garland is kept inside the temporary temple and worshipped as Goddess throughout the festival. From the third day the garland is kept inside a well decorated earthen pot (*Ghata*) and worshipped. Besides the main *Ghata*, eight other *Ghatas* are worshipped as the *Parsvadevatas*.

The period of the festival is the period of rejoicing and merry making for the entire locality. Not only the daughter, who is given away in marriage has come but the Goddess Herself (not the moving image or *Chalanti Pratima*) has come to their house. The devotees enjoy the occasion. The entire population comes in close personal contact with the Goddess. The Goddess also goes around meeting the friends, relatives and neighbours. Nevertheless, regular worship continues in the main temple. From the third day the *Ghatas* move around the locality. The main *Ghata* with the garland of *Itala* flowers (*Itamalla*) brought from the temple inside, is carried by the wife of *Desa Behera* and other eight *Ghatas* are carried by the wives of other *Dera* Chiefs (*Senapatis*). The ladies who carry the *Ghatas* observe fasting during the day and in the night take the *Prasad* from the Goddess for the entire festival period. The whole area is decorated with flowers and chariots. The town is excited with cultural activity. As many as 25 chariots (*Kalakunja*) are prepared for the purpose, which are named as Ramachandra, Laxman, Nagarjuna, Narayan, Kali, Jwalamukhi, Bana Durga, etc. This gives an opportunity to one and all to welcome the Goddess at their doorsteps. On the last day thousand of ladies from all over the towns as per their *manasika* carry *Ghatas* along with the nine ladies from *Dera* community and go round the locality. All of them observe fasting and live on *Prasad* only. The wife of *Desa Behera* worships and carries the *Sahasra Chhidra Ghata* (*Ghat* with thousand holes). After going round the town they reach the main temple where the *Ghatas* are immersed which marks the end of the festival.

There is no fixed time and rule for the period of the festival. She can stay as long as She wants like for five days, seven days, fifteen days, twenty-one days or even more. During this period, worship is performed in the temporary temple by the same set of priests as in the regular temple. Brahmin *Sevakas* are also engaged during the period to perform some offerings like *Sahasra Kumkuma Puja*, *Raja Bhoga* and *Homa*. The *Sevakas* of the *Devi* temples from the outskirts of the city also assist the regular *sevakas* to accommodate the crowd. Unlike the other Goddess of Odisha, there is no animal sacrifice during the festival. Rice, curd, sweets, bananas, coconuts and other items constitute the *Prasad*. The *Grama Devatis* or the presiding deities of the villages are normally in wild form for

which they were worshipped outside the village in small temples or under trees. In Odisha, *Dasamahabhuja* (Durga) is worshipped at ten different places as Samalai, Mangala, Bhagabati, Sarala, Hingula, Bhattarika, Charchika, Ugratara, Biraja and Tara Tarini. In *Gram Devati* form Durga has many names and forms. *Thakurani* of Berhampur is one such presiding deity who protects the town. In Ganjam there are four such Goddesses who are considered as four sisters i.e. *Thakurani* at Berhampur, Khambeswari at Aska, Boirani at Kabisuryanagar and Rama Chandi near Purushottampur. Gradually *Thakurani Yatra* has come to be associated with commercialism. As such the *Dera* community is known for production of high quality *patta*. They were rich and could afford a festival with pomp and gaiety. In due course, people from other business communities like the *Kumutis* associated themselves with the festival. The *Bada Bazar* area is the commercial headquarters of entire south Odisha. The *yatra* involved large scale flow of people and consequently good business. The period of the *yatra* is directly depends on the business turn over. Today, the *yatra* has become a very good medium for sales promotion. Deliberate and successful efforts have been made by the business community to make it a mass based festival in order to attract involvement of more people. Another very important activity associated with *Thakurani yatra* is the *Besha* system. Originally those who had some sort of *Manasika* wishing the welfare for their family and children would take up various types of *Besa*. But today it has almost become a profession for many. However, so far this is restricted among the children and males only. The theme of the *Beshas* are mythological, social as well as cultural such as Krushna, Rama, Balarama, Siba, Hanuman as mythological characters and Ascetic, Tantrik, Astrologer, Police as social characters etc. *Bagha Nacha*, Tribal Dance etc. form important cultural items. People take up *Beshas* irrespective of caste and socio-economic status.

If children from leading families are seen going round the streets in different *Beshas* so the children of poorest of the poor are also seen doing the same (Sabita Pattnayak, 2004). Different folk dances like *Bharata Leela*, *Dasakathia*, *Radhaprema Leela*, *Prahallada Natak*, *Kandhei Nacha*, *Ranapa Nacha*, *Baghanacha* and animal mask dances are performed at the different places of the town on the occasion of *Thakurani Yatra*. The *Thakurani Yatras* are also performed in the different villages and towns of south Odisha among them the *Thakurani Yatras* of Kabisuryanagar, Pitala, Ichhapur, Rayagada, Bhanjanagar, Baliguda, Karapada, Jarada, Digapahandi, Koraput, Jeypore, Nabarangpur, Malkangiri, Gunupur and Aska are famous. Both Telugu and Odia communities worship *Thakurani* as a result the *Thakurani* remains a symbol of communal harmony and goodwill between the different communities of Odisha (Subasini Pattnayak.).

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