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Bishahari and Belongings: A Critical Exploration of Caste, Gender and Alternative Representations of Folk Tradition in Angh Pradesh (Bihar)

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Abstract:

The Bishahari Pooja, a folk ritual tradition of Bihar, is celebrated in Bhagalpur and nearby districts of Bihar and West Bengal. This festival is a unique blend of religion and ritualism, ecology and nature, feminism and visual arts. The festival is associated with the tradition of the Manjusha Painting as the aesthetic representation of the rituals, myths and folklore related to this tradition. Bishahari Pooja is centred around myths relating Manasa Devi and Bishahari along with Bihula and Bala Lakhender that portraits women at the centre of this folk tradition.

Some existing studies dealing with this folk tradition discuss the relationship between culture and gender identities through the folk traditions of Manasa Devi (Maity 46). Researchers have also focused on this tradition being lost due to a lack of preservation (Atreya 52-59). The theme of the folklore represents the human traits such as lust for power and recognition, ego, competition, greed, etc., among the gods and the heroic act of Bihula in protecting her husband, Bala Lakhender, which is a reversal of the majoritarian narrative on the conjugal relationship, wherein the husband protects the wife. The Bishahari Pooja can be viewed through the lenses of the open dialectics of Humanity and Divinity, wherein the 'lofty divine' traits of the gods and goddesses often engage in dialogues with the 'banality called human'.

Keywords: Folklore, Manjusha Painting, Dialectics of Divinity and Humanity, Indigenous Knowledge System, Feminism.

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Introduction

Humans are the most advanced living species among all other living creatures on Earth. what makes human beings the most unique creatures is their unique capability of learning and superlative adaptation techniques. Adaptation is seen in other creatures as well, but it is limited to survival of their species viz., food, habitat, reproduction, etc. Humans have adopted a unique style of culture and tradition that has made them different and provide diversity and uniqueness. As stated, "the study of folk culture and oral tradition is complementary to each other. One cannot be fully understood in the absence of the other" (Dutta 28).

The cultural tradition of India traces back to prehistoric period, to the Indus Valley Civilization, in which we find evidence of worship of nature in forms of animals, plants, and even seasons. The traditions continued, and the diversity of India, due to different languages, religions, demography and geographical differences, gave birth to numerous traditions, each being unique and essential for the human race. Even the British found the traditions in India to be antique. William Jones in his work The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus explains that Hindus are a people of great antiquity, and their traditions are older than those of any other nation (415-431)**.** The age-old saying of India *'kosh kosh par paani badle, char kosh par vaani'* which literally means that in India, water changes every mile and language every four miles.

Bihar has witnessed one of the most influential dynasties of world. The Magadh was the power centre of Indian subcontinent for around 700-800 years starting from 6th century BC. In modern times the folk traditions of Bihar include Chhat Pooja, Jhijiya, Nat Natin, Videshiya, Launda Naach, Sama Chakeya, Mithila paintings, Manjusha paintings and others. Some of them have attained worldwide recognition like Chhat Pooja and Mithila Painting, while others are losing relevance and are on the verge of extinction. Recently, with the death of Bhikhari

Thakur, often known as Shakespeare of Bhojpuri, there has been a void in Launda Naach tradition of Bihar.

Bishahari Pooja is one of the oldest folk traditions of Bihar, celebrated in northeastern parts of Bihar and bordering West Bengal. The tradition has multiple dimensions and has a web-like structure of folklore, traditions, mythologies, cultures, dresses, dances, offerings and even foods. Bishahari Pooja is centred around Manasa devi and Bishahari, and it placest women at the centre of tradition, which is different from others, as most of the civilisations and cultures are centred around men. This research paper is unique in exploring new paradigms in the folk lineage of Bihar, that has so far been limited to the canonisation and commercialisation of the Chhat Festival, the Madhubani Painting and the Bhojpuri Launda Naach. This folk tradition has mostly survived orally, and without the documentation of the same, will face the threat of extinction. This research paper aims at analysing the Bishahari Pooja as an alternative form of folk culture of Bihar, and at critically looking into the folk narratives, songs and rituals associated with it.

Exploring new paradigms in the folk lineage of Bihar:

The present folk lineage of Bihar is limited to the canonisation and commercialisation of the Chhat Festival, the Madhubani Painting and the Bhojpuri Launda Naach which has gathered importance not only in common cultural landscape of Bihar but also with the passage of time, it has reached through out the globe. Recently, the celebration of chaat pooja in the 'Times Square Area' of New York city signifies its importance. The colonisation of India, and the migration of Indian workers have made a significant contribution to it. Papiya Ghosh (21-34) in her research paper titled Partition's Bihari highlighted the reasons for cultural flourishment of tradition of Bihar in Africa. This culture became an integral part of African Indian, those who migrated to Africa in search of jobs and most often as bonded labours. Bishahari Pooja,

on the other hand, was limited to the Purvanchal area of Bihar and, more significantly, to the borders of Bihar and Bengal.

The survival aspect of Bishahari pooja was limited due to its oral folk tradition. Documentation and literary works have not been done to an extent that might help in its survival, which may cause a threat to its existence in the near future. Local arcticians (Manoj Pandit) have focused on commercialisation and vocalisation of this culture, through folk art form Manjusha and popular fair tradition. The folk culture establishes a close relation between divinity and humanity, and also covers environmental aspects that have been carried forward and connected to the lives of common life culture of Bihar and Bengal.

Ritual, Belief and community: Tracing the origin of Bishahari Pooja in Angh Pradesh

In a country like India, where the majority of the population is illiterate and where tribes still inhabit many parts, the absence of written historical tradition is quite natural, but being unwritten does not mean being unknown (Vatuk 24). Bishahari pooja is a folk tradition of Bihar , that is celebrated and practiced in Angh Pradesh (modern day Bhagalpur, a district in state of Bihar). Bhagalpur District has a few recovered sites from Palaeolithic times. These sites are Raj Pokhar, Bhaljare and Rajdai in Mali Pahar, katoriya and Antichak in Kahalgaon and Mandar Hills (Sinha 77-84). These pieces of historical evidences from the palaeolithic times suggest that human settlements were prevalent in these areas for a long time. These settlements gave rise to societies and culture. The geographical location of Angh Pradesh is a flood plain of the Ganga, which gives the settlements ample scope of water for their field. Apart from it, a network of perennial river from the Himalayas made the area full of flora and fauna, ideal for human settlement. At present, there has been no evidence of Neolithic levels from Bhagalpur district. We however, have evidence of Chalcolithic Black and Red ware (BRW) culture from about 10^{th} – 9^{th} century BC at Oriup (Sahay 10-14).

The abundance of fishing nets and beads depicting snake and fish suggest a close relation of people in this area with fish and snakes. The floodplain of the Ganga has ample scope of fishing, and this gave rise to fish as part of food culture of the region. The rich diversity also supports reptiles, including snakes. Thus, snake became a part of life for people around the area. Almost every tradition across the globe that has flourished in areas of rich bio diversities includes the snake as a part of its culture.

The cultural area of any region is mostly governed by some type of ownership. The first one is a group of people working together for hunting gathering and protecting themselves. The second phase becomes organised clan, which may or may not have a single leader, and finally, a society based on class system (Sharma 103). Although the settlements mostly remained the same, the society and culture change overtime. This also holds true in the folk culture of Angh Pradesh. Bishahari Pooja, once celebrated and participated by the whole community, became focused on class system of society in modern era. The prevalence of communities like Malakar and Kumbhakar at present in the Manjusha art form is evident through it.

The Angh Pradesh was first mentioned in Athraveda (IV,17.4) which is dated back to 700 BC. This reference highlights the importance of the area around 2700 years ago. After the invasion of the Aryans in Indo-Gangetic plain, often called the Aryanisation of the region, the area must have witnessed a power struggle, this power struggle is well reflected through the text available from that time. The people of Angh Pradesh were described as ‘Vratyas’ or people which lived outside the pale of orthodox Brahminism. Although that differentiation cannot be proved by empirical evidence, but the reason could be find out on basis of ethnographic studies. The Aryans were a different race from the local inhabitants of Angh Pradesh. The use of iron gave the Aryans a powerful edge over others. It not only helped in clearing forest and expanding their cultivation area but also gave them an upper hand in warfare

during the struggle. The other reason being difference in culture and tradition. From the Vedas, it is clearly understood that Aryan believed in yajna and other complex rituals, which the local inhabitants and tribal usually lacked.

Thus, the folklore of tribals and local inhabitants was overshadowed by the popular culture of Aryans. This gradually led to the natural suppression of festivals and culture of Angh Pradesh. The Aryans also worshipped nature, but the rituals of worship and celebration was much different from the local tradition.

Another historical evidence can be cited from 'Champeyya Jataka' (Cowell 281-290). According to the Jataka story, Champa Nagar was a place where serpent dwelt and had a king named Champaya. Thus, the area of Champa Nagar (another reign of modern-day Bhagalpur) had snakes in their culture, and as a part of society from old times. It is worth noting that the Jataka stories are stories from the past lives of Gautam Buddha, the founder of Buddhism in India.

During the Gupta period (320AD to 550 AD) art and architecture flourished. Various idols and paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddess become prevalent at that time. The different incarnation of Lord Vishnu began to be depicted in wall paintings and stone art. Shiva, who forms the part of Trinity 1. Brahma 2. Vishnu, and 3. Mahesha were accepted as a saviour from evil spirits. Lord Shiva was closely related to nature and had snake as necklace. This made the snake as a part of the divine structure. The snake was not seen as an enemy but as an associate of God and was worshipped. Societies often started worshipping snakes to cure snake bites and as a preventive offering from snake bites. Snake deities like Ananth, Vasuki, Kutila and Kambola, together with a real relic of snakes made with cow dung, gold, silver, wood, and mud, were worshipped (Chaudhary 238). The use of materials ranging from mud and cow

dungs to gold and silver indicates that the snake was an integral part of popular culture of that region.

Thus, it can be concluded that the worship of snakes was a part of the culture of Angh Pradesh. The archaeological, textual and verbal evidence indicates that the snake was a part of Society of Angh Pradesh, both from a Brahminical perspective as well as a local tradition. It was seen as an important element of ecological balance and as a saviour for low classes, who were affected mostly by snake bites. Worshipping snake was the only way for them to keep themselves safe from snakebites and to find a cure of snakebites.

Bishahari Pooja: A space for alternate representation.

"Not even the words of Bihula could move Chando who bravely told her, I will not worship frog eating Nagadevi Visharavi I will worship only one, the Great lord Shiva"(Sinha and Pandey 66). This defiant refusal by the merchant Chand Saudagar to the daughter-in-law Bihula is far from domestic dispute. It is purely a clash between a high-cultured and a low-cultured God. In this section, we shall attempt to analyse how Bishahari Pooja can be viewed from the angle of alternative representation of caste and class.

Caste and Class are the two hierarchies operating in Indian society (Chakravarti 12). Caste in present form is not based the natureof work that an individual does, as it was in Vedic period. The present caste system of Indian society is based purely on birth. The one who is born to a family of Brahmin remains a Brahmin throughout life. On the other hand, a child born in a Dalit family remains a Dalit irrespective of knowledge or wealth acquired during his lifetime. This rigid social structure places the Brahmin at the top of society and the Dalit at the bottom of it.

Class is purely a division of society based on wealth and economic prosperity. Another definition of class is in emerging societies is about the job profiles associated with individuals.

The phenomenon of 'class within caste' is common, but contrary to it, 'caste within class' is the same as it is in the caste system. Caste is a material reality with a material base; it is not only a form but a concrete material content and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continue to have crucial economic implications even today (Chakravarti 12).

A change in class does not mean change in caste. A change in class is applicable only within the caste system. Bishahari Pooja is a festival centered on goddess Bishahari, often referred to as snake goddess. Bishahari is treated as a low-pantheon God as compared to others. According to Hindu tradition, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver, and Shiva is the destroyer. The Holy Trinity represents the cyclic nature of existence, which have three elements of creation, preservation and destruction. Other deities are either Avatar or associated closely to the Trinity. Bishahari, who is often called as 'Sarp Devi', does not find a direct mention in important scriptures. The goddess is worshipped in parts of Bihar and Bengal, but snake goddesses are often worshipped under different names in different parts of the world.

Some scholars also mention Manasa as 'Jiguli', which is said to be influenced by Kirata girl (the conqueror of poison) of Athar Veda. The character is said to be influenced, but not the same. Apart from the low-pantheon God, most of the village God in South India are females (Whitehead 17-18). Every village has a Gram Devta, and every family has a Kul Devta. The Gram Devta is associated with protecting the village against the wrath of nature. The Manasa is also a village goddess of specific region, this worship of a Gram Devi, who is a female deity make the pooja a perfect example of alternative representation and the subversion of hegemonic discourse.

It is believed that Manjusha painting was initially practiced by two communities, the Kumbhakar and the Malakar. Kumbhakar is the caste which is associated with making earthen pots and comes under the list of 'extremely backward caste' of Bihar. Kumbhakar are closely

associated with the river, clay and cow dung cakes, they are crucial for making pots. Malakar are people associated with business of flowers and gardening; in earlier time they used to sell flower for temples, but in modern times, Malakar also works in marriage function for decoration. Both communities are treated as low caste in the caste system of Indian society. The financial crisis makes them not only a lower caste but also a lower class in society. As in Sri-Lankan post-colonial societies, it was impossible for drummers and dancers, who were considered lower caste to receive national award, but folklore gave them national recognition (Mantillake 12). Manjusha painting and Bishahari Pooja made communities, the Kumbhakar and the Malakar special, and gave voice to their art, that were shadowed for long due to popular culture and hegemony of superior classes.

Religion and Ritualism

The depiction of Shiva, Parvati, Bishahari along with human characters of Bihula, Chand Saudagar and Bala Lakhender makes this form of folk culture unique in the cultural landscape of Bihar. While rituals vary from place to place, they revolve around sacrificial offerings, fasting, and the concept of theophany manifested in the Bhagat and Bhagatani. It is important to note that Bhagat and Bhagatani remind us of the divine character of God being taken up by humans. Bhagat and Bhagatani not only signifies the power within but also have an impulse of divine power that can transform the will into existence. The concept is long-lived and finds its way in interconnection of human with God.

Talking about the rituals that make idol-making unique, the process starts with religious folklore that makes the devi happy and act as a way to obtain permission for starting the idol-making process. Once the folklore is over, water from seven wells is collected along with water of the Ganga River. This ensures the purity of the materials used and the unification of society though wells of seven different region. The process also presents a perfect example

of the integration of different strata of society. The Human ritualistic aspect and festivity pitted against high pantheon of 'divine' religion blends into the form of festival.

The dialogic structure consisting of humanity and its traits such as lust for power, jealousy, anger, greed, ego, revenge on the one hand and traits of divinity like autonomy, omnipresence, supremacy, supernatural power on the other hand, finds a significant place in the folk form of Bishahari pooja. The traits of Divinity that are shown in this folk tradition take place through petty humanity traits like 'Greed' of being worshipped as the major deity among others, 'ego' of not being recognised in the popular masses, 'anger' for not following instructions given by goddess and finally 'revenge' by killing the husband of Bihula by the goddess Bishahari. The story unfolds all humanistic characters that are shown to be present within the divine power.

In contrast to that, the Sublime Humanity through popular Divinity traits of Bihula with 'love' for her husband's dead body, 'self-sufficient' and 'assertive of autonomy' while crossing the river upstream being alone on the boat, 'faithfulness' for her love that is not physically present but in the form of a dead body, 'forgiveness' and compassion towards tormentors and enemies, those who caused the death of her beloved husband. This divine character present in human is depicted in the folklore, that finds a direct link between Humanity and Divinity.

Folklore and Painting

The negative yet idealistic imagery of women is particularly true of songs and stories sung and told by men. The image is of an oppressed, betrayed and downtrodden woman who has not found her voice to protest in many folklores (Singh 41). The Manjusha art form is a visual practice that portraits the tradition and culture of the marginalised. The theme of painting represents a working woman, a humanistic god, a supporting society among others.

Bishahari pooja is treated as incomplete without Manjusha Painting. The painting finds significance in popular culture because it was used by Bihula while sailing upstream the river for days out of love for her husband and with the firm belief that she can make her husband alive, and hence commonly associated with Bishahari pooja. Interestingly, it is considered inauspicious by common (upper caste) married women of the region because the painting was used as a flag on the ship carrying the dead body of Bihula's husband. The fact that the flag contained Manjusha painting that helped her navigating upstream the river and ultimately brought her husband back to live never get recognised. The commentary on caste and Cclass structures also highlights the importance of recognition of folk culture of an area, as the pooja holds more significance in lower castes of society. One of the chief aims and scopes of this paper is recognition and preservation of this art form along with the folk culture associated with it.

Conclusion

The cultural diversity of Bishahari pooja and its narration make women the flag-bearer of society; it not only shows the unconditional love for the husband but also challenges the patriarchal notion of society that affirms women need to be protected by men. Men and women working in conjugation for a better society forms its core principle. The need to include folk culture in popular literacy discourse shall help in building back the cultural identity of India and also help in development of Indian knowledge system along lines of National Education Policy 2020. The need to preserve folk tradition is the need of hour in a developing world of technology and artificial intelligence, for human being to remain 'humane' and stay connected to their roots, for a social and culturally rich society that unites itself along with diversity. In the context of Bihar, Bishahari pooja needs to be promoted not only by literary scholars but also by the government so as to get recognition like other folk forms such as Chhat pooja and

Mahbubani painting. Bishahari pooja is an assimilation of humanity and divinity, society and environment and an immense bonding love of a wife for her husband.

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